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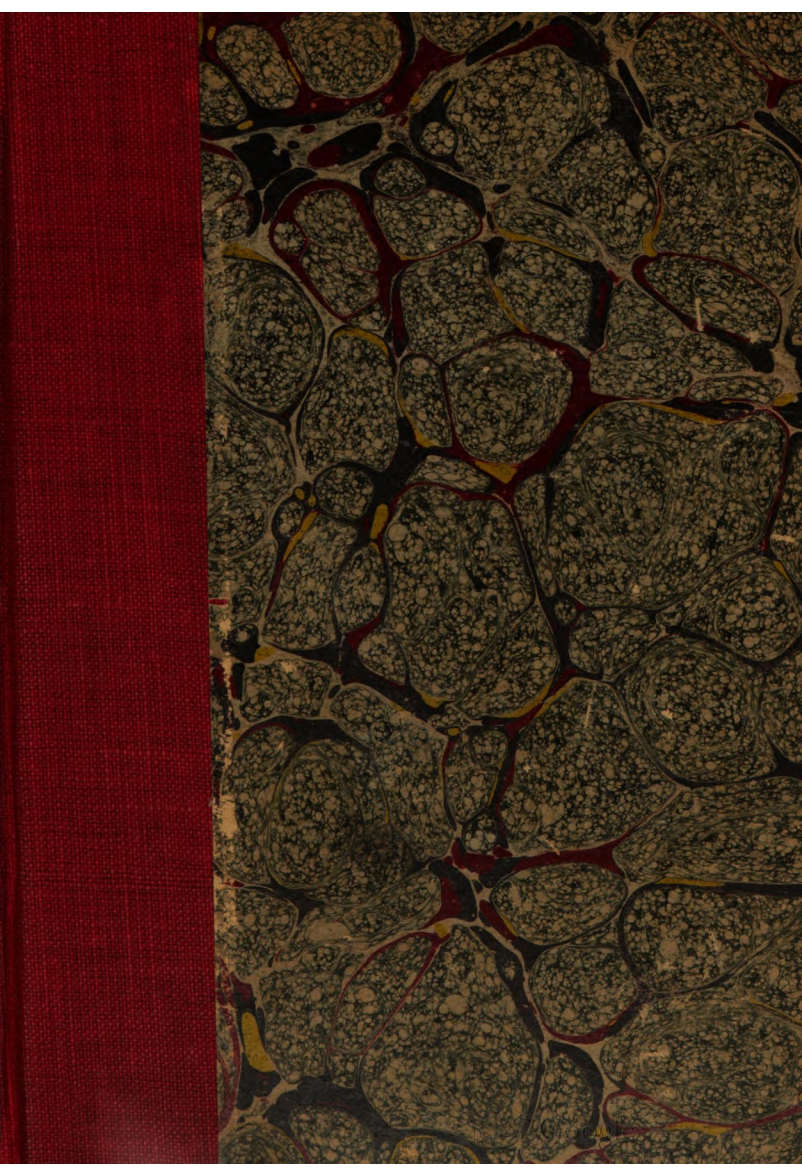
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VOL. 4412.

COME RACK! COME ROPE!

BY
ROBERT HUGH BENSON.

IN TWO VOLUMES. — VOL. 2.

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COME RACK! COME ROPE!

BY
ROBERT HUGH BENSON

IN TWO VOLUMES

VOL. II

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COME RACK! COME ROPE!

BY

ROBERT HUGH BENSON

AUTHOR OF "THE NECROMANCERS," "THE DAWN OF ALL,"
"THE COWARD," ETC.

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IN TWO VOLUMES

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COME RACK! COME ROPE!

PART II. (CONTINUED.)

CHAPTER IX.

I.

"MARJORIE! Marjorie! Wake up! the order hath come. It is for to-night!"

Very slowly Marjorie rose out of the glimmering depths of sleep into which she had fallen on the hot August afternoon, sunk down upon the arm of the great chair that stood by the parlour window, and saw Mrs. Thomas radiant before her, waving a scrap of paper in her hand.

Nearly two months were passed; and as yet no opportunity had been given to the prisoner's wife to visit him, and during that time it had been impossible to go back into the hills and leave the girl alone. The heat of the summer had been stifling, down here in the

valley; a huge plague of grasshoppers had ravaged all England; and there were times when even in the grass-country outside Derby, their chirping had become intolerable. The heat, and the necessary seclusion, and the anxiety had told cruelly upon the country girl; Marjorie's face had perceptibly thinned; her eyes had shadows above and beneath; yet she knew she must not go; since the young wife had attached herself to her altogether, finding Alice (she said) too dull for her spirits. Mr. Bassett was gone again. There was no word of a trial; although there had been a hearing or two before the magistrates; and it was known that Topcliffe continually visited the prison.

One piece of news only had there been to comfort her during this time, and that, that Mr. John's prediction had been fulfilled with regard to the captured priest, Mr. Garlick, who, back from Rheims only a few months, had been deported from England, since it was his first offence. But he would soon be over again, no doubt, and next time with death as the stake in the game.

Marjorie drew a long breath, and passed her hands over her forehead.

"The order?" she said. "What order?"

The girl explained, torrentially. A man had come just now from the Guildhall; he had asked for Mrs. FitzHerbert; she had gone down into the hall to see him; and all the rest of the useless details. But the effect was that leave had been given at last to visit the prisoner—for two persons, of which Mrs. FitzHerbert must be one; and that they must present the order to

the gaoler before seven o'clock, when they would be admitted. She looked—such was the constitution of her mind—as happy as if it were an order for his release. Marjorie drove away the last shreds of sleep; and kissed her.

“That is very good news,” she said. “Now we will begin to do something.”

The sun had sunk so far, when they set out at last, as to throw the whole of the square into golden shade; and, in the narrow, overhung Friar's Gate, where the windows of the upper storeys were so near that a man might shake hands with his friend on the other side, the twilight had already begun. They had determined to walk, in order less to attract attention, in spite of the filth through which they knew they must pass, along the couple of hundred yards that separated them from the prison. For every housewife emptied her slops out of doors, and swept her house (when she did so at all) into the same place: now and again the heaps would be pushed together and removed, but for the most part they lay there, bones and rags and rotten fruit,—dusty in one spot, so that all blew about—dampened in others where a pail or two had been poured forth. The heat too, was stifling, cast out again towards evening from the roofs and walls that had drunk it in all day from the burning skies.

As they stood before the door at last and waited, after beating the great iron knocker on the iron plate, a kind of despair came down on Marjorie. They had advanced just so far in two months as to be allowed to speak with the prisoner; and, from her talkings, with

Mr. Biddell, had understood how little that was. Indeed, he had hinted to her plainly enough that even in this it might be that they were no more than pawns in the enemy's hand; and that, under a show of mercy, it was often allowed for a prisoner's friends to have free access to him in order to shake his resolution. If there was any cause for congratulation then, it lay solely in the thought that other means had so far failed. One thing at least they knew, for their comfort, that there had been no talk of torture. . . .

It was a full couple of minutes before the door opened to show them a thin, brown-faced man, with his sleeves rolled up, dressed over his shirt and hose in a kind of leathern apron. He nodded as he saw the ladies, with an air of respect, however, and stood aside to let them come in. Then, with the same civility, he asked for the order, and read it, holding it up to the light that came through the little barred window over the door.

It was an unspeakably dreary little entrance passage in which they stood, wainscoted solidly from floor to ceiling with wood that looked damp and black from age; the ceiling itself was indistinguishable in the twilight; the floor seemed composed of packed earth, three or four doors showed in the woodwork; that opposite to the one by which they had entered stood slightly ajar, and a smoky light shone from beyond it. The air was heavy and hot and damp, and smelled of mildew.

The man gave the order back when he had read it, made a little gesture that resembled a bow, and led the way straight forward.

They found themselves, when they had passed through

the half-open door, in another passage running at right-angles to the entrance, with windows, heavily barred, so as to exclude all but the faintest twilight, even though the sun was not yet set; there appeared to be foliage of some kind, too, pressing against them from outside, as if a little central yard lay there; and the light, by which alone they could see their way along the uneven earth floor, came from a flambeau which hung by the door, evidently put there just now by the man who had opened to them; he led them down this passage to the left, down a couple of steps; unlocked another door of enormous weight and thickness and closed this behind them. They found themselves in complete darkness.

"I'll be with you in a moment, mistress," said his voice; and they heard his steps go on into the dark and cease.

Marjorie stood passive; she could feel the girl's hands clasp her arm, and could hear her breath come like sobs. But before she could speak, a light shone somewhere on the roof; and almost immediately the man came back carrying another flambeau. He called to them civilly; they followed. Marjorie once trod on some soft, damp thing that crackled beneath her foot. They groped round one more corner; waited, while they heard a key turning in a lock. Then the man stood aside, and they went past into the room. A figure was standing there; but for the first moment they could see no more. Great shadows fled this way and that as the gaoler hung up the flambeau. Then the door closed again behind them; and Elizabeth flung herself into her husband's arms.

II.

When Marjorie could see him, as at last he put his wife into the single chair that stood in the cell and gave her the stool, himself sitting upon the table, she was shocked by the change in his face. It was true that she had only the wavering light of the flambeau to see him by (for the single barred window was no more than a pale glimmer on the wall), yet even that shadowy illumination could not account for his paleness and his fallen face. He was dressed miserably, too; his clothes were disordered and rusty-looking; and his features looked out, at once pinched and elongated. He blinked a little from time to time; his lips twitched beneath his ill-cut moustache and beard; and little spasms passed, as he talked, across his whole face. It was pitiful to see him; and yet more pitiful to hear him talk; for he assumed a kind of courtesy, mixed with bitterness. Now and again he fell silent, glancing with a swift and furtive movement of his eyes from one to the other of his visitors and back again. He attempted to apologise for the miserableness of the surroundings in which he received them—saying that her Grace his hostess could not be everywhere at once; and that her guests must do the best that they could. And all this was mixed with sudden wails from his wife, sudden graspings of his hands by hers. It all seemed to the quiet girl, who sat ill-at-ease on the little three-legged stool, that this was not the way to meet adversity. Then she drove down her criticism; and told herself that she ought rather to admire one of Christ's confessors.

"And you bring me no hope, then, Mistress Manners?" he said presently (for she had told him that there was no talk yet of any formal trial)—"no hope that I may meet my accusers face to face? I had thought perhaps——"

He lifted his eyes swiftly to hers, and dropped them again.

She shook her head.

"And yet that is all that I ask now—only to meet my accusers. They can prove nothing against me—except, indeed, my recusancy; and that they have known this long time back. They can prove nothing as to the harbouring of any priests—not within the last year, at any rate, for I have not done so. It seemed to me——"

He stopped again, and passed his shaking hand over his mouth, eyeing the two women with momentary glances, and then looking down once more.

"Yes?" said Marjorie.

He slipped off from the table, and began to move about restlessly.

"I have done nothing—nothing at all," he said. "Indeed, I thought——" And once more he was silent.

He began to talk presently of the Derbyshire hills—of Padley and of Norbury. He asked his wife of news from home, and she gave it him, interrupting herself with laments. Yet all the while his eyes strayed to Marjorie as if there was something he would ask of her, but could not. He seemed completely unnerved, and for the first time in her life the girl began to understand something of what gaol-life must signify. She had heard of death and the painful Question; and she had

perceived something of the heroism that was needed to meet them; yet she had never before imagined what that life of confinement might be, until she had watched this man, whom she had known in the world as a curt and almost masterful gentleman, careful of his dress, particular of the deference that was due to him, now become this worn prisoner, careless of his appearance, who stroked his mouth continually, once or twice gnawing his nails, who paced about in this abominable hole, where a tumbled heap of straw and blankets represented a bed, and a rickety table with a chair and a stool his sole furniture. It seemed as if a husk had been stripped from him, and a shrinking creature had come out of it which at present she could not recognise.

Then he suddenly wheeled on her, and for the first time some kind of forcefulness appeared in his manner.

"And my Uncle Bassett?" he cried abruptly. "What is he doing all this while?"

Marjorie said that Mr. Bassett had been most active on his behalf with the lawyers, but, for the present, was gone back again to his estates. Mr. Thomas snorted impatiently.

"Yes, he is gone back again," he cried, "and he leaves me to rot here! He thinks that I can bear it for ever, it seems!"

"Mr. Bassett has done his utmost, sir," said Marjorie. "He exposed himself here daily."

"Yes, with twenty fellows to guard him, I suppose. I know my Uncle Bassett's ways. . . . Tell me, if you please, how matters stand."

Marjorie explained again. There was nothing in the world to be done until the order came for his trial

—or, rather, everything had been done already. His lawyers were to rely exactly on the defence that had been spoken of just now; it was to be shown that the prisoner had harboured no priests; and the witnesses had already been spoken with—men from Norbury and Padley, who would swear that to their certain knowledge no priest had been received by Mr. FitzHerbert at least during the previous year or eighteen months. There was, therefore, no kind of reason why Mr. Bassett or Mr. John FitzHerbert should remain any longer in Derby. Mr. John had been there, but had gone again, under advice from the lawyers; but he was in constant communication with Mr. Biddell, who had all the papers ready and the names of the witnesses, and had made more than one application already for the trial to come on.

“And why has neither my father nor my Uncle Bassett come to see me?” snapped the man.

“They have tried again and again, sir,” said Marjorie. “But permission was refused. They will no doubt try again, now that Mrs. FitzHerbert has been admitted.”

He paced up and down again for a few steps without speaking. Then again he turned on her, and she could see his face working uncontrolledly.

“And they will enjoy the estates, they think, while I rot here!”

“Oh, my Thomas!” moaned his wife, reaching out to him. But he paid no attention to her.

“While I rot here!” he cried again. “But I will not! I tell you I will not!”

“Yes, sir?” said Marjorie gently, suddenly aware that her heart had begun to beat swiftly.

He glanced at her, and his face changed a little.

"I will not," he murmured. "I must break out of my prison. Only their accursed——"

Again he interrupted himself, biting sharply on his lip.

For an instant the girl had thought that all her old distrust of him was justified, and that he contemplated in some way the making of terms that would be disgraceful to a Catholic. But what terms could these be? He was a FitzHerbert; there was no evading his own blood; and he was the victim chosen by the Council to answer for the rest. Nothing, then, except the denial of his faith—a formal and deliberate apostasy—could serve him; and to think that of the nephew of old Sir Thomas, and the son of John, was inconceivable. There seemed no way out; the torment of this prison must be borne. She only wished he could have borne it more manfully.

It seemed, as she watched him, that some other train of thought had fastened upon him. His wife had begun again her lamentations, bewailing his cell and his clothes, and his loss of liberty, asking him whether he were not ill, whether he had food enough to eat; and he hardly answered her or glanced at her, except once when he remembered to tell her that a good gift to the gaoler would mean a little better food, and perhaps more light for himself. And then he resumed his pacing; and, three or four times as he turned, the girl caught his eyes fixed on hers for one instant. She wondered what was in his mind to say.

Even as she wondered there came a single loud rap

upon the door, and then she heard the key turning. He wheeled round, and seemed to come to a determination.

"My dearest," he said to his wife, "here is the gaoler come to turn you out again. I will ask him——" He broke off as the man stepped in.

"Mr. Gaoler," he said, "my wife would speak alone with you a moment." (He nodded and winked at his wife, as if to tell her that this was the time to give him the money.) "Will you leave Mistress Manners here for a minute or two while my wife speaks with you in the passage?"

Then Marjorie understood that she had been right. The man who held the keys nodded without speaking.

"Then, my dearest wife," said Thomas, embracing her all of a sudden, and simultaneously drawing her towards the door, "we will leave you to speak with the man. He will come back for Mistress Manners directly."

"Oh! my Thomas!" wailed the girl, clinging to him.

"There, there, my dearest. And you will come and see me again as soon as you can get the order."

The instant the door was closed he came up to Marjorie and his face looked ghastly.

"Mistress Manners," he said, "I dare not speak to my wife. But . . . but, for Jesu's sake, get me out of here. I . . . I cannot bear it. . . . Topcliffe comes to see me every day. . . . He . . . he speaks to me continually of—— O Christ! Christ! I cannot bear it!"

He dropped suddenly onto his knees by the table and hid his face.

III.

At Babington House Marjorie slept, as was often the custom, in the same room with her maid—a large, low room, hung all round with painted cloths above the low wainscoting.

On the night after the visit to the prison, Janet noticed that her mistress was restless; and that while she would say nothing of what was troubling her, and only bade her go to bed and to sleep, she herself would not go to bed. At last, in sheer weariness, the maid slept.

She awakened later, at what time she did not know, and, in her uneasiness, sat up and looked about her; and there, still before the crucifix, where she had seen her before she slept, kneeled her mistress. She cried out in a loud whisper:

“Come to bed, mistress; come to bed.”

And, at the word, Marjorie started; then she rose, turned, and in the twilight of the summer night began to prepare herself for bed, without speaking. Far away across the roofs of Derby came the crowing of a cock to greet the dawn.

CHAPTER X.

I.

It was a fortnight later that there came suddenly to Babington House old Mr. Biddell himself. Up to the present he had been careful not to do so. He appeared in the great hall an hour before dinner-time, as the tables were being set, and sent a servant for Mistress Manners.

"Hark you!" he said; "you need not rouse the whole house. It is with Mistress Manners alone that my business lies."

He broke off, as Mrs. FitzHerbert looked over the gallery.

"Mr. Biddell!" she cried.

He shook his head, but he seemed to speak with some difficulty.

"It is just a rumour," he said, "such as there hath been before. I beg you——"

"That . . . there will be no trial at all?"

"It is just a rumour," he repeated. "I did not even come to trouble you with it. It is with Mistress Manners that——"

"I am coming down," cried Mrs. Thomas, and vanished from the gallery.

Mr. Biddell acted with decision. He whisked out again into the passage from the court, and there ran straight into Marjorie, who was coming in from the little enclosed garden at the back of the house.

"Quick!" he said. "Quick! Mrs. Thomas is coming, and I do not wish——"

She led the way without a word back into the court, along a few steps, and up again to the house into a little back parlour that the steward used when the house was full. It was unoccupied now, and looked out into the garden whence she was just come. She locked the door when he had entered, and came and sat down out of sight of any that might be passing.

"Sit here," she said; and then: "Well?" she asked.

He looked at her gravely and sadly, shaking his head once or twice. Then he drew out a paper or two from a little lawyer's valise that he carried, and, as he did so, heard a hand try the door outside.

"That is Mrs. Thomas," whispered the girl. "She will not find us."

He waited till the steps moved away again. Then he began. He looked anxious and dejected.

"I fear it is precisely as you thought," he said. "I have followed up every rumour in the place. And the first thing that is certain is that Topcliffe leaves Derby in two days from now. I had it as positive information that his men have orders to prepare for it. The second thing is that Topcliffe is greatly elated; and the third is that Mr. FitzHerbert will be released as soon as Topcliffe is gone."

"You are sure this time, sir?"

He assented by a movement of his head.

"I dared not tell Mrs. Thomas just now. She would give me no peace. I said it was but a rumour, and so it is; but it is a rumour that hath truth behind it. He hath been moved, to, these three days back, to another cell, and hath every comfort."

He shook his head again.

"But he hath made no promise——" began Marjorie breathlessly.

"It is exactly that which I am most afraid of," said the lawyer. "If he had yielded, and consented to go to church, it would have been in every man's mouth by now. But he hath not, and I should fear it less if he had. That's the very worst part of my news."

"I do not understand——"

Mr. Biddell tapped his papers on the table.

"If he were an open and confessed enemy, I should fear it less," he repeated. "It is not that. But he must have given some promise to Topcliffe that pleases the fellow more. And what can that be but that——"

Marjorie turned yet whiter. She sighed once as if to steady herself. She could not speak, but she nodded.

"Yes, Mistress Manners," said the old man. "I make no doubt at all that he hath promised to assist him against them all—against Mr. John his father, it may be, or Mr. Bassett, or God knows whom! And yet still feigning to be true! And that is not all."

She looked at him. She could not conceive worse than this, if indeed it were true.

"And do you think," he continued, "that Mr. Topcliffe will do all this for love, or rather, for mere malice? I have heard more of the fellow since he hath been in

Derby than in all my life before; and, I tell you, he is for feathering his own nest if he can." He stopped.

"Mistress, did you know that he had been out to Padley three or four times since he came to Derby? . . . Well, I tell you now that he has. Mr. John was away, praise God; but the fellow went all round the place and greatly admired it."

"He went out to see what he could find?" asked the girl, still whispering.

The other shook his head.

"No, mistress; he searched nothing. I had it all from one of his fellows through one of mine. He searched nothing; he sat a great while in the garden, and ate some of the fruit; he went through the hall and the rooms, and admired all that was to be seen there. He went up into the chapel-room, too, though there was nothing there to tell him what it was; and he talked a great while to one of the men about the farms, and the grazing, and such-like; but he meddled with nothing." (The old man's face suddenly wrinkled into fury.) "The devil went through it all like that, and admired it; and he came out to it again two or three times and did the like."

He stopped to examine the notes he had made, and Marjorie sat still, staring on him.

It was worse than anything she could have conceived possible. That a FitzHerbert should apostatise was incredible enough; but that one should sell his family—— It was impossible.

"Mr. Biddell," she whispered piteously, "it cannot be. It is some——"

He shook his head suddenly and fiercely.

"Mistress Manners, it is as plain as daylight to me. Do you think I could believe it without proof? I tell you I have lain awake all last night, fitting matters one into the other. I did not hear about Padley till last night, and it gave me all that I needed. I tell you Topcliffe hath cast his foul eyes on Padley and coveted it; and he hath demanded it as a price for Mr. Thomas' liberty. I do not know what else he hath promised, but I will stake my fortune that Padley is part of it. That is why he is so elated. He hath been here nearly this three months back; he hath visited Mr. FitzHerbert nigh every day; he hath cajoled him, he hath threatened him; he hath worn out his spirit by the gaol and the stinking food and the loneliness; and he hath prevailed, as he hath prevailed with many another. And the end of it all is that Mr. FitzHerbert hath yielded—yet not openly. Maybe that is part of the bargain upon the other side, that he should keep his name before the world. And on this side he hath promised Padley, if that he may but keep the rest of the estates, and have his liberty. I tell you that alone cuts all the knots of this tangle. . . . Can you cut them in any other manner?"

There was a long silence. From the direction of the kitchen came the sound of cheerful voices, and the clatter of lids, and from the walled garden outside the chatter of birds. . . .

At last the girl spoke.

"I cannot believe it without evidence," she said. "It may be so. God knows! But I do not. . . . Mr. Bid-dell?"

"Well, mistress?"

The lawyer's head was sunk on his breast; he spoke listlessly.

"He will have given some writing to Mr. Topcliffe, will he not? if this be true. Mr. Topcliffe is not the man——"

The old man lifted his head sharply; then he nodded.

"That is the shrewd truth, mistress. Mr. Topcliffe will not trust to another's honour; he hath none of his own!"

"Well," said Marjorie, "if all this be true, Mr. Topcliffe will already have that writing in his possession."

She paused.

"Eh?" said the lawyer.

They looked at one another again in silence. It would have seemed to another that the two minds talked swiftly and wordlessly together, the trained thought of the lawyer and the quick wit of the woman; for when the man spoke again, it was as if they had spoken at length.

"But we must not destroy the paper," he said, "or the fat will be in the fire. We must not let Mr. Fitz-Herbert know that he is found out."

"No," said the girl. "But to get a view of it. . . . And a copy of it, to send to his family."

Again the two looked each at the other in silence—as if they were equals—the old man and the girl.

II.

It was the last night before the Londoners were to return.

They had lived royally these last three months. The agent of the Council had had a couple of the best rooms in the inn that looked onto the market-square, where he entertained his friends, and now and then a magistrate or two. Even Mr. Audrey, of Matstead, had come to him once there, with another, but had refused to stay to supper, and had ridden away again alone.

Downstairs, too, his men had fared very well indeed. They knew how to make themselves respected, for they carried arms always now, since the unfortunate affair a day after the arrival, when two of them had been gravely battered about by two rustic servants, who, they learned, were members of a Popish household in the town. But all the provincial fellows were not like this. There was a big man, half clerk and half man-servant to a poor little lawyer, who lived across the square—a man of no wit indeed, but, at any rate, one of means and of generosity, too, as they had lately found out—means and generosity, they understood, that were made possible by the unknowing assistance of his master. In a word it was believed among Mr. Topcliffe's men that all the refreshment which they had lately enjoyed, beyond that provided by their master, was at old Mr. Biddell's expense, though he did not know it, and that George Beaton, fool though he was, was a cleverer man than his employer. Lately, too, they had come to learn, that although George Beaton was half clerk, half man-

servant, to a Papist, he was yet at heart as stout a Protestant as themselves, though he dared not declare it for fear of losing his place.

On this last night they made very merry indeed, and once or twice the landlord pushed his head through the doorway. The baggage was packed, and all was in readiness for a start soon after dawn.

There came a time when George Beaton said that he was stifling with the heat; and, indeed, in this low-ceilinged room after supper, with the little windows looking onto the court, the heat was surprising. The men sat in their shirts and trunks. So that it was as natural as possible that George should rise from his place and sit down again close to the door where the cool air from the passage came in; and from there, once more, he led the talk, in his character of rustic and open-handed boor; he even beat the sullen man who was next him genially over the head to make him give more room, and then he proposed a toast to Mr. Topcliffe.

It was about half an hour later, when George was becoming a little anxious, that he drew out at last a statement that Mr. Topcliffe had a great valise upstairs, full of papers that had to do with his law business. (He had tried for this piece of information last night and the night before, but had failed to obtain it.) Ten minutes later again, then, when the talk had moved to affairs of the journey, and the valise had been forgotten, it was an entirely unsuspecting circumstance that George and the man that sat next him should slip out to take the air in the stable-court. The Londoner was so fuddled with drink as to think that he had gone out at

his own deliberate wish; and there, in the fresh air, the inevitable result followed; his head swam, and he leaned on big George for support. And here, by the one stroke of luck that visited poor George this evening, it fell that he was just in time to see Mr. Topcliffe himself pass the archway in the direction of Friar's Gate, in company with a magistrate, who had supped with him upstairs.

Up to this point George had moved blindly, step by step. He had had his instructions from his master, yet all that he had been able to determine was the general plan to find out where the papers were kept, to remain in the inn till the last possible moment, and to watch for any chance that might open to him. Truly, he had no more than that, except, indeed, a vague idea that it might be necessary to bribe one of the men to rob his master. Yet there was everything against this, and it was, indeed, a last resort. It seemed now, however, that another way was open. It was exceedingly probable that Mr. Topcliffe was off for his last visit to the prisoner, and, since a magistrate was with him, it was exceedingly improbable that he would take the paper with him. It was not the kind of paper—if, indeed, it existed at all—that more persons would be allowed to see than were parties to the very discreditable affair.

And now George spoke earnestly and convincingly. He desired to see the baggage of so great a man as Mr. Topcliffe; he had heard so much of him. His friend was a good fellow who trusted him (here George embraced him warmly). Surely such a little thing would be allowed as for him, George, to step in and view

Mr. Topcliffe's baggage, while the faithful servant kept watch in the passage! Perhaps another glass of ale——

III.

"Yes, sir," said George an hour later, still a little flushed with the amount of drink he had been forced to consume. "I had some trouble to get it. But I think this is what your honour wanted."

He began to search in his deep breast-pocket.

"Tell me," said Mr. Biddell.

"I got the fellow to watch in the passage, sir; him that I had made drunk, while I was inside. There were great bundles of papers in the valise. . . . No, sir, it was strapped up only. . . . The most of the papers were docketed very legally, sir; so I did not have to search long. There were three or four papers in a little packet by themselves; besides a great packet that was endorsed with Mr. FitzHerbert's name, as well as Mr. Topcliffe's and my lord Shrewsbury's; and I think I should not have had time to look that through. But, by God's mercy, it was one of the three or four by themselves."

He had the paper in his hand by now. The lawyer made a movement to take it. Then he restrained himself.

"Tell me, first," he said.

"Well, sir," said George, with a pardonable satisfaction in spinning the matter out, "one was all covered with notes, and was headed 'Padley.' I read that through, sir. It had to do with the buildings and the acres, and so forth. The second paper I could make

nothing out of; it was in cypher, I think. The third paper was the same; and the fourth, sir, 'was that which I have here."

The lawyer started.

"But I told you——"

"Yes, sir; I should have said that this is the copy—or, at least, an abstract. I made the abstract by the window, sir, crouching down so that none should see me. Then I put all back as before, and came out again; the fellow was fast asleep against the door."

"And Topcliffe——"

"Mr. Topcliffe, sir, returned half an hour afterwards in company again with Mr. Hamilton. I waited a few minutes to see that all was well, and then I came to you, sir."

There was silence in the little room for a moment. It was the small back office of Mr. Biddell, where he did his more intimate business, looking out onto a paved court. The town was for the most part asleep, and hardly a sound came through the closed windows.

Then the lawyer turned and put out his hand for the paper without a word. He nodded to George, who went out, bidding him good night.

Ten minutes later Mr. Biddell walked quietly through the passengers' gate by the side of the great doors that led to the court beside Babington House, closing it behind him. He knew that it would be left unbarred till eleven o'clock that night. He passed on through the court, past the house door, to the steward's office, where through heavy curtains a light glimmered. As he put his hand on the door it opened, and Marjorie was there.

He said nothing, nor did she. Her face was pale and steady, and there was a question in her eyes. For answer he put the paper into her hands, and sat down while she read it. The stillness was as deep here as in the office he had just left.

IV.

It was a minute or two before either spoke. The girl read the paper twice through, holding it close to the little handlamp that stood on the table.

"You see, mistress," he said, "it is as bad as it can be."

She handed back the paper to him; he slid out his spectacles, put them on, and held the writing to the light.

"Here are the points, you see . . ." he went on. "I have annotated them in the margin. First, that Thomas FitzHerbert be released from Derby gaol within three days from the leaving of Topcliffe for London, and that he be no more troubled, neither in fines nor imprisonment; next, that he have secured to him, so far as the laws shall permit, all his inheritance from Sir Thomas, from his father, and from any other bequests whether of his blood-relations or no; thirdly, that Topcliffe do 'persecute to the death'"—(the lawyer paused, cast a glance at the downcast face of the girl) "'—do persecute to the death' his uncle Sir Thomas, his father John, and William Bassett his kinsman; and, in return for all this, Thomas FitzHerbert shall become her Grace's sworn servant—that is, Mistress Manners, her Grace's

spy, pursuivant, informer and what-not—and that he shall grant and secure to Richard Topcliffe, Esquire, and to his heirs for ever, ‘the manors of Over Padley and Nether Padley, on the Derwent, with six messuages, two cottages, ten gardens, ten orchards, a thousand acres of land, five hundred acres of meadow-land, six hundred acres of pasture, three hundred acres of wood, a thousand acres of furze and heath, in Padley, Grindleford and Lyham, in the parish of Hathersage, in consideration of eight hundred marks of silver, to be paid to Thomas FitzHerbert, Esquire, etc.’”

The lawyer put the paper down, and pushed his spectacles on to his forehead.

“That is a legal instrument?” asked the girl quietly, still with downcast eyes.

“It is not yet fully completed, but it is signed and witnessed. It can become a legal instrument by Topcliffe’s act; and it would pass muster——”

“It is signed by Mr. Thomas?”

He nodded.

She was silent again. He began to tell her of how he had obtained it, and of George’s subtlety and good fortune; but she seemed to pay no attention. She sat perfectly still. When he had ended, she spoke again.

“A sworn servant of her Grace——” she began.

“Topcliffe is a sworn servant of her Grace,” he said bitterly; “you may judge by that what Thomas FitzHerbert hath become.”

“We shall have his hand, too, against us all, then?”

“Yes, mistress; and, what is worse, this paper, I take it——” (he tapped it) “this paper is to be a secret for the present. Mr. Thomas will still feign himself to

be a Catholic, with Catholics, until he comes into all his inheritances. And, meantime, he will supply information to his new masters."

"Why cannot we expose him?"

"Where is the proof? He will deny it."

She paused.

"We can at least tell his family. You will draw up the informations?"

"I will do so."

"And send them to Sir Thomas and Mr. Bassett?"

"I will do so."

"That may perhaps prevent his inheritance coming to him as quickly as he thinks."

The lawyer's eyes gleamed.

"And what of Mrs. Thomas, mistress?"

Marjorie lifted her eyes.

"I do not think a great deal of Mrs. Thomas," she said. "She is honest, I think; but she could not be trusted with a secret. But I will tell Mistress Babington, and I will warn what priests I can."

"And if it leaks out?"

"It must leak out."

"And yourself? Can you meet Mr. Thomas again just now? He will be out in three days."

Marjorie drew a long breath.

"No, sir; I cannot meet him. I should betray what I felt. I shall make excuses to Mrs. Thomas, and go home to-morrow."

PART III.

CHAPTER I.

I.

THE "Red Bull" in Cheapside was all alight; a party had arrived there from the coast not an hour ago, and the rooms that had been bespoken by courier occupied the greater part of the second floor; the rest of the house was already filled by another large company, spoken for by Mr. Babington, although he himself was not one of them. And it seemed to the shrewd landlord that these two parties were not wholly unknown to one another, although, as a discreet man, he said nothing.

The latest arrived party was plainly come from the coast. They had arrived a little after sunset on this stormy August day, splashed to the shoulders by the summer-mud, and drenched to the skin by the heavy thunder-showers. Their baggage had a battered and sea-going air about it, and the landlord thought he would not be far away if he conjectured Rheims as their starting-point; there were three gentlemen in the party, and four servants apparently; but he knew better than

to ask questions or to overhear what seemed rather over-familiar conversation between the men and their masters. There was only one, however, whom he remembered to have lodged before, over five years ago. The name of this one was Mr. Alban. But all this was not his business. His duty was to be hearty and deferential and entirely stupid; and certainly this course of behaviour brought him a quantity of guests.

Mr. Alban, about half-past nine o'clock, had finished unstrapping his luggage. It was of the most innocent description, and contained nothing that all the world might not see. He had made arrangements that articles of another kind should come over from Rheims under the care of one of the "servants," whose baggage would be less suspected. The distribution would take place in a day or two. These articles comprised five sets of altar vessels, five sets of mass-vestments, made of a stuff woven of all the liturgical colours together, a dozen books, a box of medals, another of *Agnus Dei*s—little wax medallions stamped with the figure of a Lamb supporting a banner—a bunch of beads, and a heavy little square package of very thin altar-stones.

As he laid out the suit of clothes that he proposed to wear next day, there was a rapping on his door.

"Mr. Babington is come—sir." (The last word was added as an obvious afterthought, in case of listeners.)

Robin sprang up; the door was opened by his "servant," and Anthony came in, smiling.

Mr. Anthony Babington had broadened and aged considerably during the last five years. He was still

youthful-looking, but he was plainly a man and no longer a boy. And he presently said as much for his friend.

"You are a man, Robin," he said.—"Why, it slipped my mind!"

He knelt down promptly on the strip of carpet and kissed the palms of the hands held out to him, as is the custom to do with newly-ordained priests, and Robin murmured a blessing.

Then the two sat down again.

"And now for the news," said Robin.

Anthony's face grew grave.

"Yours first," he said.

So Robin told him. He had been ordained priest a month ago, at Chalons-sur-Marne. . . . The college was as full as it could hold. . . . They had had an unadventurous journey.

Anthony put a question or two, and was answered.

"And now," said Robin, "what of Derbyshire; and of the country; and of my father? And is it true that Ballard is taken?"

Anthony threw an arm over the back of his chair, and tried to seem at his ease.

"Well," he said, "Derbyshire is as it ever was. You heard of Thomas FitzHerbert's defection?"

"Mistress Manners wrote to me of it, more than two years ago."

"Well, he does what he can: he comes and goes with his wife or without her. But he comes no more to Padley. And he scarcely makes a feint even before strangers of being a Catholic, though he has not declared himself, nor gone to church, at any rate, in his own county. Here in London I have seen him more

than once in Topcliffe's company. But I think that every Catholic in the country knows of it by now. That is Mistress Manners' doing. My sister says there has never been a woman like her."

Robin's eyes twinkled.

"I always said so," he said. "But none would believe me. She has the wit and courage of twenty men. What has she been doing?"

"What has she not done?" cried Anthony. "She keeps herself for the most part in her house; and my sister spends a great deal of time with her; but her men, who would die for her, I think, go everywhere; and half the hog-herds and shepherds of the Peak are her sworn men. I have given your Dick to her; he was mad to do what he could in that cause. So her men go this way and that bearing her letters or her messages to priests who are on their way through the county; and she gets news—God knows how!—of what is a-stirring against us. She has saved Mr. Ludlam twice, and Mr. Garlick once, as well as Mr. Simpson once, by getting the news to them of the pursuivants' coming, and having them away into the Peak. And yet with all this, she has never been laid by the heels."

"Have they been after her, then?" asked Robin eagerly.

"They have had a spy in her house twice to my knowledge, but never openly; and never a shred of a priest's gown to be seen, though mass had been said there that day. But they have never searched it by force. And I think they do not truly suspect her at all."

"Did I not say so?" cried Robin. "And what of my

father? He wrote to me that he was to be made magistrate; and I have never written to him since."

"He hath been made magistrate," said Anthony drily; "and he sits on the bench with the rest of them."

"Then he is all of the same mind?"

"I know nothing of his mind. I have never spoken with him this six years back. I know his acts only. His name was in the 'Bond of Association,' too!"

"I have heard of that."

"Why, it is two years old now. Half the gentry of England have joined it," said Anthony bitterly. "It is to persecute to the death any pretender to the Crown other than our Eliza."

There was a pause. Robin understood the bitterness.

"And what of Mr. Ballard?" asked Robin.

"Yes; he is taken," said Anthony slowly, watching him. "He was taken a week ago."

"Will they banish him, then?"

"I think they will banish him."

"Why, yes—it is the first time he hath been taken. And there is nothing great against him?"

"I think there is not," said Anthony, still with that strange deliberateness.

"Why do you look at me like that?"

Anthony stood up without answering. Then he began to pace about. As he passed the door he looked to the bolt carefully. Then he turned again to his friend.

"Robin," he said, "would you sooner know a truth that will make you unhappy, or be ignorant of it?"

"Does it concern myself or my business?" asked Robin promptly.

"It concerns you and every priest and every Catholic in England. It is what I have hinted to you before."

"Then I will hear it."

"It is as if I told it in confession?"

Robin paused.

"You may make it so," he said, "if you choose."

Anthony looked at him an instant. "Well," he said, "I will not make a confession, because there is no use in that now—but—— Well, listen!" he said, and sat down.

II.

When he ceased, Robin lifted his head. He was as white as a sheet.

"You have been refused absolution before for this?"

"I was refused absolution by two priests; but I was granted it by a third."

"Let me see that I have the tale right.

"Yourself, with a number of others, have bound yourselves by an oath to kill her Grace, and to set Mary on the throne. This has taken shape now since the beginning of the summer. You yourself are now living in Mr. Walsingham's house, in Seething Lane, under the patronage of her Grace, and you show yourself freely at court. You have proceeded so far, under fear of Mr. Ballard's arrest, as to provide one of your company with clothes and necessities that can enable him to go to court; and it was your intention, as well as his, that

he should take opportunity to kill her Grace. But to-day only you have become persuaded that the old design was the better; and you wish first to arrange matters with the Queen of the Scots, so that when all is ready, you may be the more sure of a rising when that her Grace is killed, and that the Duke of Parma may be in readiness to bring an army into England. It is still your intention to kill her Grace?"

"By God! it is!" said Anthony, between clenched teeth.

"Then I could not absolve you, even if you came to confession. You may be absolved from your allegiance, as we all are; but you are not absolved from charity and justice towards Elizabeth as a woman. I have consulted theologians on the very point; and——"

Then Anthony sprang up.

"See here, Robin; we must talk this out." He flicked his fingers sharply. "See—we will talk of it as two friends."

"You had better take back those words," said the priest gravely.

"Why?"

"It would be my duty to lay an information! I understood you spoke to me as to a priest, though not in confession."

"You would!" blazed the other.

"I should do so in conscience," said the priest. "But you have not yet told me as a friend, and——"

"You mean——"

"I mean that so long as you choose to speak to me of it, now and here, it remains that I choose to regard it as *sub sigillo* in effect. But you must not come to

me to-morrow, as if I knew it all in a plain way. I do not. I know it as a priest only."

There was silence for a moment. Then Anthony stood up.

"I understand," he said. "But you would refuse me absolution in any case?"

"I could not give you absolution so long as you intended to kill her Grace."

Anthony made an impatient gesture.

"See here," he said. "Let me tell you the whole matter from the beginning. Now listen."

He settled himself again in his chair, and began.

"Robin," he said, "you remember when I spoke to you in the inn on the way to Matstead; it must be seven or eight years gone now? Well, that was when the beginning was. There was no design then, such as we have to-day; but the general purpose was there. I had spoken with man after man; I had been to France, and seen Mr. Morgan there, Queen Mary's man, and my lord of Glasgow; and all that I spoke with seemed of one mind—except my lord of Glasgow, who did not say much to me on the matter. But all at least were agreed that there would be no peace in England so long as Elizabeth sat on the throne.

"Well: it was after that that I fell in with Ballard, who was over here on some other affair; and I found him a man of the same mind as myself; he was all agog for Mary, and seemed afraid of nothing. Well; nothing was done for a great while. He wrote to me from France; I wrote back to him again, telling him the names of some of my friends. I went to see him in France

two or three times; and I saw him here, when you yourself came over with him. But we did not know whom to trust. Neither had we any special design. Her Grace of the Scots went hither and thither under strong guards; and what I had done for her before——”

Robin looked up. He was still quite pale and quite quiet.

“What was that?” he said.

Anthony again made his impatient gesture. He was fiercely excited; but kept himself under tolerable control.

“Why, I have been her agent for a great while back, getting her letters through to her, and such like. But last year, when that damned Sir Amyas Paulet became her gaoler, I could do nothing. Two or three times my messenger was stopped, and the letters taken from him. Well; after that time I could do no more. There her Grace was, back again at Tutbury, and none could get near her. She might no more give alms, even, to the poor; and all her letters must go through Walsingham’s hands. And then God helped us: she was taken last autumn to Chartley, near by which is the house of the Giffords; and since that time we have been almost merry. Do you know Gilbert Gifford?”

“He hath been with the Jesuits, hath he not?”

“That is the man. Well, Mr. Gilbert Gifford hath been God’s angel to us. A quiet, still kind of a man—you have seen him?”

“I have spoken with him at Rheims,” said Robin. “I know nothing of him.”

“Well; he contrived the plan. He hath devised a beer-barrel that hath the beer all roundabout, so that when they push their rods in, there seems all beer within.

But in the heart of the beer there is secured a little iron case; and within the iron case there is space for papers. Well, this barrel goes to and fro to Chartley and to a brewer that is a good Catholic; and within the case there are the letters. And in this way, all has been prepared——”

Robin looked up again. He remained quiet through all the story; and lifted no more than his eyes. His fingers played continually with a button on his doublet.

“You mean that Queen Mary hath consented to this?”

“Why, yes!”

“To her sister’s death?”

“Why, yes.”

“I do not believe it,” said the priest quietly. “On whose word does that stand?”

“Why, on her own! Whose else’s?” snapped Anthony.

“You mean, you have it in her own hand, signed by her name?”

“It is in Gifford’s hand! Is not that enough? And there is her seal to it. It is in cypher, of course. What would you have?”

“Where is she now?” asked Robin, paying no attention to the question.

“She hath just now been moved again to Tixall.”

“For what?”

“I do not know. What has that to do with the matter? She will be back soon again. I tell you all is arranged.”

“Tell me the rest of the story,” said the priest.

“There is not much more. So it stands at present.

I tell you her Grace hath been tossed to and fro like a ball at play. She was at Chatsworth, as you know; she has been shut up in Chartley like a criminal; she was at Babington House even. God! if I had but known it in time!"

"In Babington House! Why, when was that?"

"Last year, early—with Sir Ralph Sadler, who was her gaoler then!" cried Anthony bitterly; "but for a night only. . . . I have sold the house."

"Sold it!"

"I do not keep prisons," snapped Anthony. "I will have none of it!"

"Well?"

"Well," resumed the other man quietly. "I must say that when Ballard was taken——"

"When was that?"

"Last week only. Well, when he was taken I thought perhaps all was known. But I find Mr. Walsingham's conversation very comforting, though little he knows it, poor man! He knows that I am a Catholic; and he was lamenting to me only three days ago of the zeal of these informers. He said he could not save Ballard, so hot was the pursuit after him; that he would lose favour with her Grace if he did."

"What comfort is there in that?"

"Why; it shows plain enough that nothing is known of the true facts. If they were after him for this design of ours do you think that Walsingham would speak like that? He would clap us all in ward—long ago."

The young priest was silent. His head still whirled with the tale, and his heart was sick at the misery of it

all. This was scarcely the home-coming he had looked for! He turned abruptly to the other.

"Anthony, lad," he said, "I beseech you to give it up."

Anthony smiled at him frankly. His excitement was sunk down again.

"You were always a little soft," he said. "I remember you would have nought to do with us before. Why, we are at war, I tell you; and it is not we who declared it! They have made war on us now for the last twenty years and more. What of all the Catholics—priests and others—who have died on the gibbet, or rotted in prison? If her Grace makes war upon us, why should we not make war upon her Grace? Tell me that, then!"

"Anthony, I beseech you to give it up. I hate the whole matter, and fear it, too."

"Fear it? Why, I tell you, we hold them *so*." (He stretched out his lean, young hand, and clenched the long fingers slowly together.) "We have them by the throat. You will be glad enough to profit by it, when Mary reigns. What is there to fear?"

"I do not know; I am uneasy. But that is not to the purpose. I tell you it is forbidden by God's——"

"Uneasy! Fear it! Why, tell me what there is to fear? What hole can you find anywhere?"

"I do not know. I hardly know the tale yet. But it seems to me there might be a hundred."

"Tell me one of them, then."

Anthony threw himself back with an indulgent smile on his face.

"Why, if you will have it," said Robin, roused by

the contempt, "there is one great hole in this. All hangs upon Gifford's word, as it seems to me; you have not spoken with Mary; you have not even her own hand on it."

"Bah! Why, her Grace of the Scots cannot write in cypher, do you think?"

"I do not know how that may be. It may be so. But I say that all hangs upon Gifford."

"And you think Gifford can be a liar and a knave!" sneered Anthony.

"I have not one word against him," said the priest. "But neither had I against Thomas FitzHerbert; and you know what has befallen——"

Anthony snorted with disdain.

"Put your finger through another hole," he said.

"Well—I like not the comfort that Mr. Secretary Walsingham has given you. You told me awhile ago that Ballard was on the eve of going to France—Now Walsingham is no fool. I would to God he were! He has laid enough of our men by the heels already."

"By God!" cried Anthony, roused again. "I would not willingly call you a fool either, my man! But do you not understand that Walsingham believes me as loyal as himself? Here have I been at court for the last year, bowing before her Grace, and never a word said to me on my religion. And here is Walsingham has bidden me to lodge in his house, in the midst of all his spider's webs. Do you think he would do that if——"

"I think he might have done so," said Robin slowly.

Anthony sprang to his feet.

"My Robin," he said, "you were right enough when you said you would not join with us. You were not made for this work. You would see an enemy in your own father——"

He stopped confounded.

Robin smiled drearily.

"I have seen one in him," he said.

Anthony clapped him on the shoulder, not unkindly.

"Forgive me, my Robin. I did not think what I said. Well; we will leave it at that. And you would not give me absolution?"

The priest shook his head.

"Then give me your blessing," said Anthony, dropping on his knees. "And so we will close up the *quasi-sigillum confessionis*."

III.

It was a heavy-hearted priest that presently, downstairs, stood with Anthony in one of the guest-rooms, and was made known to half a dozen strangers. Every word that he had heard upstairs must be as if it had never been spoken, from the instant at which Anthony had first sat down to the instant in which he had kneeled down to receive his blessing. So much he knew from his studies at Rheims. He must be to each man that he met, that which he would have been to him an hour ago. Yet, though as a man he must know nothing, his priest's heart was heavy in his breast. It was a strange home-coming—to pass from the ordered piety of the college, to the whirl of politics and plots in

which good and evil spun round together—honest and fiery zeal for God's cause, mingled with what he was persuaded was crime and abomination. He had thought that a priest's life would be a simple thing, but it seemed otherwise now.

He spoke with those half-dozen men—those who knew him well enough for a priest; and presently, when some of his own party came, drew aside again with Anthony, who began to tell him in a low voice of the personages there.

"These are all my private friends," he said, "and some of them be men of substance in their own place. There is Mr. Charnoc, of Lancashire, he with the gilt sword. He is of the Court of her Grace, and comes and goes as he pleases. He is lodged in Whitehall, and comes here but to see his friends. And there is Mr. Savage, in the new clothes, with his beard cut short. He is a very honest fellow, but of a small substance, though of good family enough."

"Her Grace has some of her ladies, too, that are Catholics, has she not?" asked Robin.

"There are two or three at least, and no trouble made. They hear mass when they can at the Embassies. Mendoza is a very good friend of ours."

Mr. Charnoc came up presently to the two. He was a cheerful-looking man, of northern descent, very particular in his clothes, with large gold earrings; he wore a short, pointed beard above his stiff ruff, and his eyes were bright and fanatical.

"You are from Rheims, I understand, Mr. Alban."

He sat down with something of an air next to Robin.

"And your county——?" he asked.

"I am from Derbyshire, sir," said Robin.

"From Derbyshire. Then you will have heard of Mistress Marjorie Manners, no doubt."

"She is an old friend of mine," said Robin, smiling. (The man had a great personal charm about him.)

"You are very happy in your friends, then," said the other. "I have never spoken with her myself; but I hear of her continually as assisting our people—sending them now up into the Peak country, now into the towns, as the case may be—and never a mistake."

It was delightful to Robin to hear her praised, and he talked of her keenly and volubly. Exactly that had happened which five years ago he would have thought impossible; for every trace of his old feeling towards her was gone, leaving behind, and that only in the very deepest intimacies of his thought, a sweet and pleasant romance, like the glow in the sky when the sun is gone down. Little by little that had come about which, in Marjorie, had transformed her when she first sent him to Rheims. It was not that reaction had followed; there was no contempt, either of her or of himself, for what he had once thought of her; but another great passion had risen above it—a passion of which the human lover cannot even guess, kindled for one that is greater than man; a passion fed, trained and pruned by those six years of studious peace at Rheims, directed by experts in humanity. There he had seen what Love could do when it could rise higher than its human channels; he had seen young men, scarcely older than

himself, set out for England, as for their bridals, exultant and on fire; and back to Rheims had come again the news of their martyrdom: this one died, crying to Jesu as a home-coming child cries to his mother at the garden-gate; this one had said nothing upon the scaffold, but his face (they said who brought the news), had been as the face of Stephen at his stoning; and others had come back themselves, banished, with pain of death on their returning, yet back once more these had gone. And, last, more than once, there had crept back to Rheims, borne on a litter all the way from the coast, the phantom of a man who a year or two ago had played "cat" and shouted at the play—now a bent man, grey-haired, with great scars on wrists and ankles. . . . *Te Deums* had been sung in the college chapel when the news of the deaths had come: there were no *requiems* for such as these; and the place of the martyr in the refectory was decked with flowers. . . . Robin had seen these things, and wondered whether his place, too, would some day be so decked.

For Marjorie, then, he felt nothing but a happy friendliness, and a real delight when he thought of seeing her again. It was glorious, he thought, that she had done so much; that her name was in all men's mouths. And he had thought, when he had first gone to Rheims, that he would do all and she nothing! He had written to her then, freely and happily. He had told her that she must give him shelter some day, as she was doing for so many.

Meanwhile it was pleasant to hear her praises.

"'Eve would be Eve,'" quoted Mr. Charnoc pre-

sently, in speaking of pious women's obstinacy, "‘though Adam would say Nay.’"

Then, at last, when Mr. Charnoc said that he must be leaving for his own lodgings, and stood up; once more upon Robin's heart there fell the horrible memory of all that he had heard upstairs.

CHAPTER II.

I.

IT was strange to Robin to walk about the City, and to view all that he saw from his new interior position. The last time that he had been in his own country on that short visit with "Captain Fortescue," he had been innocent in the eyes of the law, or, at least, no more guilty than any one of the hundreds of young men who, in spite of the regulations, were sent abroad to finish their education amid Catholic surroundings. Now, however, his very presence was an offence: he had broken every law framed expressly against such cases as his; he had studied abroad, he had been "ordained beyond the seas;" he had read his mass in his own bedchamber; he had, practically, received a confession; and it was his fixed and firm intention to "reconcile" as many of "her Grace's subjects" as possible to the "Roman See." And, to tell the truth, he found pleasure in the sheer adventure of it, as would every young man of spirit; and he wore his fine clothes, clinked his sword, and cocked his secular hat with delight.

The burden of what he had heard still was heavy on him. It was true that in a manner inconceivable to

any but a priest it lay apart altogether from his common consciousness: he had talked freely enough to Mr. Charnoc and the rest; he could not, even by a momentary lapse, allow what he knew to colour even the thoughts by which he dealt with men in ordinary life; for though it was true that no confession had been made, yet it was in virtue of his priesthood that he had been told so much. Yet there were moments when he walked alone, with nothing else to distract him, when the cloud came down again; and there were moments, too, in spite of himself, when his heart beat with another emotion, when he pictured what might not be five years hence, if Elizabeth were taken out of the way and Mary reigned in her stead. He knew from his father how swiftly and enthusiastically the old Faith had come back with Mary Tudor after the winter of Edward's reign. And if, as some estimated, a third of England were still convincingly Catholic, and perhaps not more than one twentieth convincingly Protestant, might not Mary Stuart, with her charm, accomplish more even than Mary Tudor with her lack of it?

He saw many fine sights during the three or four days after his coming to London; for he had to wait there at least that time, until a party that was expected from the north should arrive with news of where he was to go. These were the instructions he had had from Rheims. So he walked freely abroad during these days to see the sights; and even ventured to pay a visit to Fathers Garnett and Southwell, two Jesuits that arrived a month ago, and were for the present lodging in my Lord Vaux's house in Hackney.

He was astonished at Father Southwell's youthfulness.

This priest had landed but a short while before, and, for the present, was remaining quietly in the edge of London with the older man; for himself was scarcely twenty-five years old, and looked twenty at the most. He was very quiet and sedate, with a face of almost feminine delicacy, and passed a good deal of his leisure, as the old lord told Robin, in writing verses. He appeared a strangely fine instrument for such heavy work as was a priest's.

On another day Robin saw the Archbishop land at Westminster Stairs.

It was a brilliant day of sunshine as he came up the river-bank, and a little crowd of folks at the head of the stairs drew his attention. Then he heard, out of sight, the throb of oars grow louder; then a cry of command; and, as he reached the head of the stairs and looked over, the Archbishop, with a cloak thrown over his rochet, was just stepping out of the huge gilded barge, whose blue-and-silver liveried oarsmen steadied the vessel, or stood at the salute. It was a gay and dignified spectacle as he perceived, in spite of his intense antipathy to the sight of a man who, to him, was no better than an usurper and a deceiver of the people. Dr. Whitgift, too, was no friend to Catholics: he had, for instance, deliberately defended the use of the rack against them and others, unashamed; and in one particular instance, at least, as Bishop of Worcester, had directed its exercise in the county of Denbigh. These things were perfectly known, of course, even beyond the seas, to the priests who were to go on the English

mission, in surprising detail. Robin knew even that this man was wholly ignorant of Greek; he looked at him carefully as he came up the stairs, and was surprised at the kindly face of him, thin-lipped, however, though with pleasant, searching eyes. His coach was waiting outside Old Palace Yard, and Robin, following with the rest of the little crowd, saluted him respectfully, as he climbed into it, followed by a couple of chaplains.

As he walked on, he glanced back across the river at Lambeth. There it lay, then, the home of Warham and Pole and Morton, with the water lapping its towers. It had once stood for the spiritual State of God in England, facing its partner—(and sometimes its rival)—Westminster and Whitehall; now it was a department of the civil State merely. It was occupied by men such as Dr. Grindal, sequestered and deprived of even his spiritual functions by the woman who now grasped all the reins of the Commonwealth; and now again by the man whom he had just seen, placed there by the same woman to carry out her will more obediently against all who denied her supremacy in matters spiritual as well as temporal, whether Papists or Independents.

The priest was astonished, as he reached the precincts of Whitehall, to observe the number of guards that were everywhere visible. He had been warned at Rheims not to bring himself into too much notice, no more than markedly to avoid it; so he did not attempt to penetrate even the outer courts or passages. Yet it seemed to him that an air of watchfulness was everywhere. At the gate towards which he looked at least

half a dozen men were on formal guard, their uniforms and weapons sparkling brilliantly in the sunshine; and besides these, within the open doors he caught sight of a couple of officers. As he stood there, a man came out of one of the houses near the gate, and turned towards it: he was immediately challenged, and presently passed on within, where one of the officers came forward to speak to him. Then Robin thought he had stood looking long enough, and moved away.

He came back to the City across the fields, half a mile away from the river, and, indeed, it was a glorious sight he had before him. Here, about him, was open ground on either side of the road on which he walked; and there, in front, rose up on the slope of the hill the long line of great old houses, beyond the stream that ran down into the Thames—old Religious Houses for the most part, now disguised and pulled about beyond recognition, ranging right and left from the Ludgate itself: behind these rose again towers and roofs, and high above all the tall spire of the Cathedral, as if to gather all into one culminant aspiration. . . . The light from the West lay on every surface that looked to his left, golden and rosy; elsewhere lay blue and dusky shadows.

II.

"There is a letter for you, sir," said the landlord, who had an uneasy look on his face, as the priest came through the entrance of the inn.

Robin took it. Its superscription ran shortly: "To Mr. Alban, at the Red Bull Inn in Cheapside. Haste. Haste. Haste."

He turned it over; it was sealed plainly on the back without arms or any device; it was a thick package, and appeared as if it might hold an enclosure or two.

Robin had learned caution in a good school, and what is yet more vital in true caution, an appearance of carelessness. He weighed the packet easily in his hand, as if it were of no value, though he knew it might contain very questionable stuff from one of his friends, and glanced at a quantity of baggage that lay heaped beside the wall.

"What is all this?" he said. "Another party arrived?"

"No, sir; the party is leaving. Rather, it is left already; and the gentlemen bade me have the baggage ready here. They would send for it later, they told me."

This was unusually voluble from this man. Robin looked at him quickly, and away again.

"What party?" he said.

"The gentlemen you were with this two nights past, sir," said the landlord keenly.

Robin was aware of a feeling as if a finger had been laid on his heart; but not a muscle of his face moved.

"Indeed!" he said. "They told me nothing of it."

Then he moved on easily, feeling the landlord's eyes in every inch of his back, and went leisurely upstairs.

He reached his room, bolted the door softly behind him, and sat down. His heart was going now like a hammer. Then he opened the packet; an enclosure fell out of it, also sealed, but without direction of any kind.

Then he saw that the sheet in which the packet had come was itself covered with writing, rather large and sprawling, as if written in haste. He put the packet aside, and then lifted the paper to read it.

When he had finished, he sat quite still. The room looked to him misty and unreal; the paper crackled in his shaking fingers, and a drop of sweat ran suddenly into the corner of his dry lips. Then he read the paper again. It ran as follows:

"It is all found out, we think. I find myself watched at every point, and I can get no speech with B. I cannot go forth from the house without a fellow to follow me, and two of my friends have found the same. Mr. G., too, hath been with Mr. W. this three hours back. By chance I saw him come in, and he has not yet left again. Mr. Ch. is watching for me while I write this, and will see that this letter is bestowed on a trusty man who will bring it to your inn, and, with it, another letter to bid our party save themselves while they can. I do not know how we shall fare, but we shall meet at a point that is fixed, and after that evade or die together. You were right, you see. Mr. G. has acted the traitor throughout, with Mr. W.'s connivance and assistance. I beg of you, then, to carry this letter, which I send in this, to Her for whom we have forfeited our lives, or, at least, our country; or, if you cannot take it with safety, master the contents of it by note and deliver it to her with your own mouth. She has been taken back to C. again, whither you must go, and all her effects searched."

There was no signature, but there followed a dash

of the pen, and then a scrawled "A. B.," as if an interruption had come, or as if the man who was with the writer would wait no longer.

A third time Robin read it through. It was terribly easy of interpretation. "B." was Ballard; "G." was Gifford; "W." was Walsingham; "Ch." was Charnoc; "Her" was Mary Stuart; "C." was Chartley. It fitted and made sense like a child's puzzle. And, if the faintest doubt could remain in the most incredulous mind as to the horrible reality of it all, there was the piled luggage downstairs, that would never be "sent for" (and never, indeed, needed again by its owners in this world).

Then he took up the second sealed packet, and held it unbroken, while his mind flew like a bird, and in less than a minute he decided, and opened it.

It was a piteous letter, signed again merely "A. B.," and might have been written by any broken-hearted reverent lover to his beloved. It spoke an eternal good-bye; the writer said that he would lay down his life gladly again in such a cause if it were called for, and would lay down a thousand if he had them; he entreated her to look to herself, for that no doubt every attempt would now be made to entrap her; and it warned her to put no longer any confidence in a "detestable knave, G. G." Finally, he begged that "Jesu would have her in His holy keeping," and that if matters fell out as he thought they would, she would pray for his soul, and the souls of all that had been with him in the enterprise.

He read it through three or four times; every line

and letter burned itself into his brain. Then he tore it across and across; then he tore the letter addressed to himself in the same manner; then he went through all the fragments, piece by piece, tearing each into smaller fragments, till there remained in his hands just a bunch of tiny scraps, smaller than snowflakes, and these he scattered out of the window.

Then he went to his door, unbolted it, and walked downstairs to find the landlord.

III.

It was not until ten days later, soon after dawn, that Robin set out on his melancholy errand. He rode out northward as soon as the gates were opened, with young "Mr. Arnold," a priest ordained with him in Rheims, and one of his party, disguised as a servant, following him on a pack-horse with the luggage. It was a misty morning, white and cheerless, with the early fog that had drifted up from the river. Last night the news had come in that Anthony and at least one other had been taken near Harrow, in disguise, and the streets had been full of riotous rejoicing over the capture.

He had thought it more prudent to wait till after receiving the news, which he so much dreaded, lest haste should bring suspicion on himself, and the message that he carried; since for him, too, to disappear at once would have meant an almost inevitable association of him with the party of plotters; but it had been a hard time to pass through. Early in the morning, after Anthony's flight, he had awakened to hear a rapping upon

the inn door, and, peeping from his window, had seen a couple of plainly dressed men waiting for admittance; but after that he had seen no more of them. He had deliberately refrained from speaking with the landlord, except to remark again upon the luggage of which he caught a sight, piled no longer in the entrance, but in the little room that the man himself used. The landlord had said shortly that it had not yet been sent for. And the greater part of the day—after he had told the companions that had come with him from Rheims that he had had a letter, which seemed to show that the party with whom they had made friends had disappeared, and were probably under suspicion, and had made the necessary arrangements for his own departure with young Mr. Arnold—he spent in walking abroad as usual. The days that followed had been bitter and heavy. He had liked neither to stop within doors nor to go abroad, since the one course might arouse enquiry and the second lead to his identification. He had gone to my Lord Vaux's house again and again, with his friend and without him; he had learned of the details of Anthony's capture, though he had not dared even to attempt to get speech with him; and, further, that unless the rest of the men were caught, it would not be easy to prove anything against him. One thing, therefore, he prayed for with all his heart—that the rest might yet escape. He told his party something of the course of events, but not too much. On the Sunday that intervened he went to hear mass in Fetter Lane, where numbers of Catholics resorted; and there, piece by piece, learned more of the plot than even Anthony had told him.

Mr. Arnold was a Lancashire man and a young convert of Oxford—one of that steady small stream that poured over to the Continent—a sufficiently well-born and intelligent man to enjoy acting as a servant, which he did with considerable skill. It was common enough for gentlemen to ride side by side with their servants when they had left the town; and by the time that the two were clear of the few scattered houses outside the City gates, Mr. Arnold urged on his horse, and they rode together.

Robin was in somewhat of a difficulty as to how far he was justified in speaking of what he knew. It was true that he was not at liberty to use what Anthony had originally told him; but the letter and the commission which he had received certainly liberated his conscience to some degree, since it told him plainly enough that there was a plot on behalf of Mary, that certain persons, one or two of whom he knew for himself, were involved in it, that they were under suspicion, and that they had fled. Ordinary discretion, however, was enough to make him hold his tongue, beyond saying, as he had said already to the rest of them, that he was the bearer of a message from Mr. Babington, now in prison, to Mary Stuart. Mr. Arnold had been advertised that he might take up his duties in Lancashire as soon as he liked; but, because of his inexperience and youth, it had been decided that he had better ride with "Mr. Alban" so far as Chartley at least, and thence, if all were well, go on to Lancaster itself, where his family was known, and whither he could return, for the present, without suspicion.

The roads, such as they were, were in a terrible state still with the heavy rain of a few days ago, and the further showers that had fallen in the night. They made very poor progress, and by dinner-time were not yet in sight of Watford. But they pushed on, coming at last about one o'clock to that little town, all gathered together in the trench of the low hills. There was a modest inn in the main street, with a little garden behind it; and while Mr. Arnold took the horses off for watering, Robin went through to the garden, sat down, and ordered food to be served for himself and his man together. The day was warmer, and the sun came out as they sat over their meal. When they had done, Robin sent his friend off again for the horses. They must not delay longer than was necessary, if they wished to sleep at Leighton, and give the horses their proper rest.

When he was left alone, he fell a-thinking once more; and, what with the morning's ride and the air and the sunshine, and the sense of liberty, he was inclined to be more cheerful. Surely England was large enough to hide the rest of the plotters for a time, until they could get out of it. Anthony was taken, indeed, yet, without the rest, he might very well escape conviction. Robin had not been challenged in any way; the gate-keepers had looked at him, indeed, as he came out of the City; but so they always did, and the landlady here had run her eyes over him; but that was the way of landladies who wished to know how much should be charged to travellers. And if he had come out so easily, why should not his friends? All turned now, to

his mind, on whether the rest of the conspirators could evade the pursuivants or not.

He stood up presently to stretch his legs before mounting again, and as he stood up he heard running footsteps somewhere beyond the house: they died away; but then came the sound of another runner, and of another, and he heard voices calling. Then a window was flung up beyond the house; steps came rattling down the stairs within and passed out into the street. It was probably a bull that had escaped, or a mad dog, he thought, or some rustic excitement of that kind, and he thought he would go and see it for himself; so he passed out through the house, just in time to meet Mr. Arnold coming round with the horses.

"What was the noise about?" he asked.

The other looked at him.

"I heard none, sir," he said. "I was in the stable."

Robin looked up and down the street. It seemed as empty as it should be on a summer's day; two or three women were at the doors of their houses, and an old dog was asleep in the sun. There was no sign of any disturbance.

"Where is the woman of the house?" asked Robin.

"I do not know, sir."

They could not go without paying; but Robin marvelled at the simplicity of these folks, to leave a couple of guests free to ride away; he went within again and called out, but there was no one to be seen.

"This is laughable," he said, coming out again. "Shall we leave a mark behind us and be off?"

"Are they all gone, sir?" asked the other, staring at him.

"I heard some running and calling out just now," said Robin. "I suppose a message must have been brought to the house."

Then, as he stood still, hesitating, a noise of voices arose suddenly round the corner of the street, and a group of men with pitchforks ran out from a gateway on the other side, fifty yards away, crossed the road and disappeared again. Behind them ran a woman or two, a barking dog, and a string of children. But Robin thought he had caught a glimpse of some kind of officer's uniform at the head of the running men, and his heart stood still.

IV.

Neither of the two spoke for a moment.

"Wait here with the horses," said Robin. "I must see what all this is about."

Mr. Arnold was scarcely more than a boy still, and he had all the desire of a boy, if he saw an excited crowd, to join himself to it. But he was being a servant just now, and must do what he was told. So he waited patiently with the two horses that tossed their jingling heads and stamped and attempted to kick flies off impossibly remote parts of their bodies. Certainly, the excitement was growing. After he had seen his friend walk quickly down the road and turn off where the group of rustically-armed men had disappeared in the direction where newly-made haystacks shaded their gables beyond the roofs of the houses, several other

figures appeared through the opposite gateway in hot pursuit. One was certainly a guard of some kind, a stout, important-looking fellow, who ran and wheezed as he ran loud enough to be heard at the inn door. The women standing before the houses, too, presently were after the rest—all except one old dame, who put her head forth, and peered this way and that with a vindictive anger at having been left all alone. More yet showed themselves—children dragging puppies after them, an old man with a large rusty sword, a couple of lads each with a pike—these appeared, like figures in a pantomime play, whisking into sight from between the houses, and all disappearing again immediately.

And then, all on a sudden, a great clamour of voices began, all shouting together, as if some quarry had been sighted: it grew louder, sharp cries of command rang above the roar. Then there burst out of the side, where all had gone in, a ball of children, which exploded into fragments and faced about, still with a couple of puppies that barked shrilly; and then, walking very fast and upright, came Mr. Robin Audrey, white-faced and stern, straight up to where the lad waited with the horses.

Robin jerked his head.

"Quick!" he said. "We must be off, or we shall be here all night." He gathered up his reins for mounting.

"What is it, sir?" asked the other, unable to be silent.

"They have caught some fellows," he said.

"And the inn-account, sir?"

Robin pulled out a couple of coins from his pouch.

"Put that on the table within," he said. "We can wait no longer. Give me your reins!"

His manner was so dreadful that the young man dared ask no more. He ran in, laid the coins down (they were more than double what could have been asked for their entertainment), came out again and mounted his own horse that his friend held. As they rode down the street, he could not refrain from looking back, as a great roar of voices broke out again; but he could see no more than a crowd of men, with the pitchforks moving like spears on the outskirt, as if they guarded prisoners within, come out between the houses and turn up towards the inn they themselves had just left.

As they came clear of the village and out again upon the open road, Robin turned to him, and his face was still pale and stern.

"Mr. Arnold," he said, "those were the last of my friends that I told you of. Now they have them all, and there is no longer any hope. They found them behind the haystacks next to the garden where we dined. They must have been there all night."

CHAPTER III.

I.

It was in the evening of the fourth day after their start that, riding up alongside of the Blythe, they struck out to the north-west, away from the trees, and saw the woods of Chartley not half a mile away. Robin sighed with relief, though, as a fact, his adventure was scarcely more than begun, since he had yet to learn how he could get speech with the Queen; but, at least, he was within sight of her, and of his own country as well. Far away, eastwards, beyond the hills, not twenty miles off, lay Derby.

It had been a melancholy ride, in spite of the air of freedom through which they rode, since news had come to them, in more than one place, of the fortunes of the Babington party. A courier, riding fast, had passed them as they sighted Buckingham; and by the time they came in, he was gone again, on Government business (it was said), and the little town hummed with rumours, out of which emerged, at any rate, the certainty that the whole company had been captured. At Coventry, again, the tidings had travelled faster than themselves; for here it was reported that Mr. Babington

Come Rack! Come Rope! II.

5

and Mr. Charnoc had been racked; and in Lichfield, last of all, the tale was complete, and (as they learned later), tolerably accurate too.

It was from a clerk in the inn there that the story came, who declared that there was no secrecy about the matter any longer, and that he himself had seen the tale in writing. It ran as follows:

The entire plot had been known from the beginning. Gilbert Gifford had been an emissary of Walsingham's throughout; and every letter that passed to and from the various personages had passed through the Secretary's hands and been deciphered in his house. There never had been one instant in which Mr. Walsingham had been at fault, or in the dark: he had gone so far, it was reported, as to insert in one of the letters that was to go to Mr. Babington, a request for the names of all the conspirators, and in return there had come from him, not only a list of the names, but a pictured group of them, with Mr. Babington himself in the midst. This picture had actually been shown to her Grace in order that she might guard herself against private assassination, since two or three of the group were in her own household.

"It is like to go hard with the Scots Queen!" said the clerk bitterly. "She has gone too far this time."

Robin said nothing to commit himself, for he did not know on which side the man ranged himself; but he drew him aside after dinner, and asked whether it might be possible to get a sight of the Queen.

"I am riding to Derby," he said, "with my man. But if to turn aside at Chartley would give us a chance of seeing her, I would do so. A queen in captivity is

worth seeing. And I can see you are a man of influence."

The clerk looked at him shrewdly; he was a man, plainly in love with his own importance, and the priest's last words were balm to him.

"It might be done," he said. "I do not know."

Robin saw the impression he had made, and that the butter could not be too thick.

"I am sure you could do it for me," he said, "if any man could. But I understand that a man of your position may be unwilling——"

The clerk solemnly laid a hand on the priest's arm.

"Well, I will tell you this," he said. "Get speech with Mr. Bourgoign, her apothecary. He alone has access to her now, besides her own women. It might be he could put you in some private place to see her go by."

This was not much use, thought Robin; but, at least, it gave him something to begin at: so he thanked the clerk solemnly and reverentially, and was rewarded by another discreet pat on the arm.

The sight of the Chartley woods, tall and splendid in the light of the setting sun, and already tinged here and there with the first marks of autumn, brought his indecision to a point; and he realised that he had no plan. He had heard that Mary occasionally rode abroad, and he hoped perhaps to get speech with her that way; but what he had heard from the clerk and others showed him that this small degree of liberty was now denied to the Queen. In some way or another he must

get news of Mr. Bourgoign. Beyond that he knew nothing.

The great gates of Chartley were closed as the two came up to them. There was a lodge beside them, and a sentry stood there. A bell was ringing from the great house within the woods, no doubt for supper-time, but there was no other human being besides the sentry to be seen. So Robin did not even check his weary horse; but turned only, with a deliberately curious air, as he went past and rode straight on. Then, as he rounded a corner he saw smoke going up from houses, it seemed, outside the park.

"What is that?" asked Arnold suddenly. "Do you hear——?"

A sound of a galloping horse grew louder behind them, and a moment afterwards the sound of another. The two priests were still in view of the sentry; and knowing that Chartley was guarded now as if it had all the treasures of the earth within, Robin reflected that to show too little interest might arouse as sharp suspicion as too much. So he wheeled his horse round and stopped to look.

They heard the challenge of the sentry within, and then the unbarring of the gates. An instant later a courier dashed out and wheeled to the right, while at the same time the second galloper came in view—another courier on a jaded horse; and the two passed—the one plainly riding to London, the second arriving from it. The gates were yet open; but the second was challenged once more before he was allowed to pass,

and his hoofs sounded on the road that led to the house. Then the gates clashed together again.

Robin turned his horse's head once more towards the houses, conscious more than ever how near he was to the nerves of England's life, and what tragic ties they were between the two royal cousins, that demanded such a furious and frequent exchange of messages.

"We must do our best here," he said, nodding towards the little hamlet.

II.

It was plainly a newly-grown little group of houses that bordered the side of the road away from the enclosed park—sprung up as a kind of overflow lodging for the dependants necessary to such a suddenly increased household; for the houses were no more than wooden dwellings, ill-roofed and ill-built, with the sap scarcely yet finished oozing from the ends of the beams and the planks. Smoke was issuing, in most cases, from rough holes cut in the roofs, and in the last rays of sunshine two or three men were sitting on stools set out before the houses.

Robin checked his horse before a man whose face seemed kindly, and who saluted courteously the fine gentleman who looked about with such an air.

"My horse is dead-spent," he said curtly. "Is there an inn here where my man and I can find lodging?"

The man shook his head, looking at the horse compassionately. He had the air of a groom about him.

"I fear not, sir, not within five miles; at least, not with a room to spare."

"This is Chartley, is it not?" asked the priest, noticing that the next man, too, was listening.

"Aye, sir."

"Can you tell me if my friend Mr. Bourgoign lodges in the house, or without the gates?"

"Mr. Bourgoign, sir? A friend of yours?"

"I hope so," said Robin, smiling, and keeping at least within the letter of truth.

The man mused a moment.

"It is possible he might help you, sir. He lodges in the house; but he comes sometimes to see a woman that is sick here."

Robin demanded where she lived.

"At the last house, sir—a little beyond the rest. She is one of her Grace's kitchen-women. They moved her out here, thinking it might be the fever she had."

This was plainly a communicative fellow; but the priest thought it wiser not to take too much interest. He tossed the man a coin and rode on.

The last house was a little better built than the others, and stood farther back from the road. Robin dismounted here, and, with a nod to Mr. Arnold, who was keeping his countenance admirably, walked up to the door and knocked on it. It was opened instantly, as if he were expected, but the woman's face fell when she saw him.

"Is Mr. Bourgoign within?" asked the priest.

The woman glanced over him before answering, and then out to where the horses waited.

"No sir," she said at last. "We were looking for him just now . . ." (She broke off.) "He is coming now," she said.

Robin turned, and there, walking down the road, was an old man, leaning on a stick, richly and soberly dressed in black, wearing a black beaver hat on his head. A man-servant followed him at a little distance.

The priest saw that here was an opportunity ready-made; but there was one more point on which he must satisfy himself first, and what seemed to him an inspiration came to his mind.

"He looks like a minister," he said carelessly.

A curious veiled look came over the woman's face. Robin made a bold venture. He smiled full in her face.

"You need not fear," he said. "I quarrel with no man's religion;" and, at the look in her face at this, he added: "You are a Catholic, I suppose? Well, I am one too. And so, I suppose, is Mr. Bourgoign."

The woman smiled tremulously, and the fear left her eyes.

"Yes, sir," she said. "All the friends of her Grace are Catholics, I think."

He nodded to her again genially. Then, turning, he went to meet the apothecary, who was now not thirty yards away.

It was a pathetic old figure that was hobbling towards him. He seemed a man of near seventy years old, with a close-cropped beard and spectacles on his nose, and he carried himself heavily and ploddingly. Robin argued to himself that it must be a kindly man who would come out at this hour—perhaps the one

hour he had to himself—to visit a poor dependant. Yet all this was sheer conjecture; and, as the old man came near, he saw there was something besides kindness in the eyes that met his own.

He saluted boldly and deferentially.

“Mr. Bourgoign,” he said in a low voice, “I must speak five minutes with you. And I ask you to make as if you were my friend.”

The old man stiffened like a watch-dog. It was plain that he was on his guard.

“I do not know you, sir.”

“I entreat you to do as I ask. I am a priest, sir. I entreat you to take my hand as if we were friends.”

A look of surprise went over the physician’s face.

“You can send me packing in ten minutes,” went on Robin rapidly, at the same time holding out his hand. “And we will talk here in the road, if you will.”

There was still a moment’s hesitation. Then he took the priest’s hand.

“I am come straight from London,” went on Robin, still speaking clearly, yet with his lips scarcely moving. “A fortnight ago I talked with Mr. Babington.”

The old man drew his arm close within his own.

“You have said enough, or too much, at present, sir. You shall walk with me a hundred yards up this road, and justify what you have said.”

“We have had a weary ride of it, Mr. Bourgoign. . . . I am on the road to Derby,” went on Robin, talking loudly enough now to be overheard, as he hoped, by any listeners. “And my horse is spent. . . . I will tell you my business,” he added in a lower tone, “as soon as you bid me.”

Fifty yards up the road the old man pressed his arm again.

"You can tell me now, sir," he said. "But we will walk, if you please, while you do so."

"First," said Robin, after a moment's consideration as to his best beginning, "I will tell you the name I go by. It is Mr. Alban. I am a newly-made priest, as I told you just now; I came from Rheims scarcely a fortnight ago. I am from Derbyshire; and I will tell you my proper name at the end, if you wish it."

"Repeat the blessing of the deacon by the priest at mass," murmured Mr. Bourgoign to the amazement of the other, without the change of an inflection in his voice or a movement of his hand.

"*Dominus sit in corde tuo et in labiis——*" began the priest.

"That is enough, sir, for the present. Well?"

"Next," said Robin, hardly yet recovered from the extraordinary promptness of the challenge—"Next, I was speaking with Mr. Babington a fortnight ago."

"In what place?"

"In the inn called the 'Red Bull,' in Cheapside."

"Good. I have lodged there myself," said the other. "And you are one——"

"No, sir," said Robin, "I do not deny that I spoke with them all—with Mr. Charnoc and——"

"That is enough of those names, sir," said the other, with a small and fearful lift of his white eyebrows, as if he dreaded the very trees that nearly met overhead in this place. "And what is your business?"

"I have satisfied you, then——" began Robin.

"Not at all, sir. You have answered sufficiently so far; that is all. I wish to know your business."

"The night following the day on which the men fled, of whom I have just spoken, I had a letter from—from their leader. He told me that all was lost, and he gave me a letter to her Grace here——"

He felt the thin old sinews under his hand contract suddenly, and paused.

"Go on, sir," whispered the old voice.

"A letter to her Grace, sir. I was to use my discretion whether I carried it with me, or learned it by rote. I have other interests at stake besides this, and I used my discretion, and destroyed the letter."

"But you have some writing, no doubt——"

"I have none," said Robin. "I have my word only." There was a pause.

"Was the message private?"

"Private only to her Grace's enemies. I will tell you the substance of it now, if you will."

The old man, without answering, steered his companion nearer to the wall; then he relinquished the supporting arm, and leaned himself against the stones, fixing his eyes full upon the priest, and searching, as it seemed, every feature of his face and every detail of his dress.

"Was the message important, sir?"

"Important only to those who value love and fidelity."

"I could deliver it myself, then?"

"Certainly, sir. If you will give me your word to deliver it to her Grace, as I deliver it to you, and to none else, I will ride on and trouble you no more."

"That is enough," said the physician decidedly. "I am completely satisfied, Mr. Alban. All that remains is to consider how I can get you to her Grace."

"But if you yourself will deliver——" began Robin.

An extraordinary spasm passed over the other's face, that might denote any fierce emotion, either of anger or grief.

"Do you think it is that?" he hissed. "Why, man, where is your priesthood? Do you think the poor dame within would not give her soul for a priest? . . . Why, I have prayed God night and day to send us a priest. She is half mad with sorrow; and who knows whether ever again in this world——"

He broke off, his face all distorted with pain; and Robin felt a strange thrill of glory at the thought that he bore with him, in virtue of his priesthood only, so much consolation. He faced for the first time that tremendous call of which he had heard so much in Rheims—that desolate cry of souls that longed and longed in vain for those gifts which a priest of Christ could alone bestow. . . .

". . . The question is," the old man was saying more quietly, "how to get you in to her Grace. Why, Sir Amyas opens her letters even, and reseals them again! He thinks me a fool, and that I do not know what he does. . . . Do you know aught of medicine?" he asked abruptly.

"I know only what country folks know of herbs."

"And their names—their Latin names, man?" pursued the other, leaning forward.

Robin half smiled.

"Now you speak of it," he said, "I have learned a

good many, as a pastime, when I was a boy. I was something of a herbalist, even. But I have forgotten——”

“Bah! that would be enough for Sir Amyas——”

He turned and spat venomously at the name.

“Sir Amyas knows nothing save his own vile trade. He is a lout—no more. He is as grim as a goose, always. And you have a town air about you,” he went on, running his eyes critically over the young man’s dress. “Those are French clothes?”

“They were bought in France.”

The two stood silent. Robin’s excitement beat in all his veins, in spite of his weariness. He had come to bear a human message only to a bereaved Queen; and it seemed as if his work were to be rather the bearing of a Divine message to a lonely soul. He watched the old man’s face eagerly. It was sunk in thought. . . . Then Mr. Bourgoign took him abruptly by the arm.

“Give me your arm again,” he said. “I am an old man. We must be going back again. It seems as if God heard our prayers after all. I will see you disposed for to-night—you and your man and the horses, and I will send for you myself in the morning. Could you say mass, think you? if I found you a secure place—and bring Our Lord’s Body with you in the morning?”

He checked the young man, to hear his answer.

“Why, yes,” said Robin. “I have all things that are needed.”

“Then you shall say mass in any case . . . and reserve our Lord’s Body in a pyx. . . . Now listen to me. If my plan falls as I hope, you must be a physician to-morrow, and have practised your trade in Paris. You have been in Paris?”

"No, sir."

"Bah! . . . Well, no more has Sir Amyas. You have practised your trade in Paris, and God has given you great skill in the matter of herbs. And, upon hearing that I was in Chartley, you enquired for your old friend, whose acquaintance you had made in Paris, five years ago. And I, upon hearing you were come, secured your willingness to see my patient, if you would but consent. Your reputation has reached me even here; you have attended His Majesty in Paris on three occasions; you restored Mademoiselle Elise, of the family of Guise, from the very point of death. You are but a young man still; yet—— Bah! It is arranged. You understand? Now come with me."

CHAPTER IV.

I.

IN spite of his plans and his hopes and his dreams, it was with an amazement beyond all telling, that Mr. Robert Alban found himself, at nine o'clock next morning, conducted by two men through the hall at Chartley to the little parlour where he was to await Sir Amyas Paulet and the Queen's apothecary.

Matters had been arranged last night with that promptness which alone could make the tale possible. He had walked back with the old man in full view of the little hamlet, to all appearances, the best of old friends; and after providing for a room in the sick woman's house for Robin himself, another in another house for Mr. Arnold, and stabling for the horses in a shed where occasionally the spent horses of the couriers were housed when Chartley stables were overflowing—after all this had been arranged by Mr. Bourgoign in person, the two walked on to the great gates of the park, where they took an affectionate farewell within hearing of the sentry, the apothecary promising to see Sir Amyas that night and to communicate with his friend in the morning. Robin had learned previously

how strict was the watch set about the Queen's person, particularly since the news of the Babington plot had first reached the authorities, and of the extraordinary difficulty to the approach of any stranger to her presence. Nau and Curle, her two secretaries, had been arrested and perhaps racked a week or ten days before; all the Queen's papers had been taken from her, and even her jewellery and pictures sent off to Elizabeth; and the only persons ordinarily allowed to speak with her, besides her gaoler, were two of her women, and Mr. Bourgoign himself.

That morning then, before six o'clock, Robin had said mass in the sick woman's room and given her communion, with her companion, who answered his mass, as it was thought more prudent that the other priest should not even be present; and, at the close of the mass he had reserved in a little pyx, hidden beneath his clothes, a consecrated particle. Mr. Bourgoign had said that he would see to it that the Queen should be fasting up to ten o'clock that day.

And now the last miracle had been accomplished. A servant had come down late the night before, with a discreet letter from the apothecary, saying that Sir Amyas had consented to receive and examine for himself the travelling physician from Paris; and here now went Robin, striving to remember the old Latin names he had learned as a boy, and to carry a medical air with him.

The parlour in which he found himself was furnished severely and even rather sparsely, owing, perhaps, he thought, to the temporary nature of the household. It

was the custom in great houses to carry with the family, from house to house, all luxuries such as extra hangings or painted pictures or carpets, as well as even such things as cooking utensils; and in the Queen's sudden removal back again from Tixall, many matters must have been neglected. The oak wainscoting was completely bare; and over the upper parts of the walls in many places the stones showed through between the ill-fitting tapestries. A sheaf of pikes stood in one corner; an oil portrait of an unknown worthy in the dress of fifty years ago hung over one of the doors; a large round oak table, with ink-horn and pounce-box, stood in the centre of the room with stools beside it: there was no hearth or chimney visible; and there was no tapestry upon the floor: a skin only lay between the windows. The priest sat down and waited.

He had enough to occupy his mind; for not only had he the thought of the character he was to sustain presently under the scrutiny of a suspicious man; but he had the prospect, as he hoped, of coming into the presence of the most-talked-of woman in Europe, and of ministering to her as a priest alone could do, in her sorest need. His hand went to his breast as he considered it, and remembered What he bore . . . and he felt the tiny flat circular case press upon his heart. . . .

For his imagination was all aflame at the thought of Mary. Not only had he been kindled again and again in the old days by poor Anthony's talk, until the woman seemed to him half-deified already; but man after man had repeated the same tale, that she was, in truth, that which her lean cousin of England desired to be thought—a very paragon of women, innocent, holy, undefiled,

yet of charm to drive men to their knees before her presence. It was said that she was as one of those strange moths which, confined behind glass, will draw their mates out of the darkness to beat themselves to death against her prison; she was exquisite, they said, in her pale beauty, and yet more exquisite in her pain; she exuded a faint and intoxicating perfume of womanliness, like a crushed herb. Yet she was to be worshipped, rather than loved—a sacrament to be approached kneeling, an incarnate breath of heaven, the more lovely from the vileness into which her life had been cast and the slanders that were about her name. . . . More marvellous than all was that those who knew her best and longest loved her most; her servants wept or groaned themselves into fevers if they were excluded from her too long; of her as of the Wisdom of old might it be said that, "They who ate her hungered yet, and they who drank her thirsted yet." . . . It was to this miracle of humanity, then, that this priest was to come. . . .

He sat up suddenly, once more pressing his hand to his breast, where his Treasure lay hidden, as he heard steps crossing the paved hall outside. Then he rose to his feet and bowed as a tall man came swiftly in, followed by the apothecary.

II.

It was a lean, harsh-faced man that he saw, long-moustached and melancholy-eyed—"grim as a goose,"

Come Rack! Come Rope! II.

as the physician had said—wearing even in this guarded household, a half-breast and cap of steel. A long sword jingled beside him on the stone floor and clashed with his spurred boots. He appeared the last man in the world to be the companion of a sorrowing Queen; and it was precisely for this reason that he had been chosen to replace the courtly Lord Shrewsbury and the gentle Sir Ralph Sadler. (Her Grace of England said that she had had enough of nurses for gaolers.) His voice, too, resembled the bitter clash of a key in a lock.

"Well, sir," he said abruptly, "Mr. Bourgoign tells me you are a friend of his."

"I have that honour, sir."

"You met in Paris, eh? . . . And you profess a knowledge of herbs beyond the ordinary?"

"Mr. Bourgoign is good enough to say so."

"And you are after her Grace of Scotland, as they call her, like all the rest of them, eh?"

"I shall be happy to put what art I possess at her Grace of Scotland's service."

"Traitors say as much as that, sir."

"In the cause of treachery, no doubt, sir."

Sir Amyas barked a kind of laugh.

"*Vous avez raison*," he said with a deplorable accent. "As her Grace would say. And you come purely by chance to Chartley, no doubt!"

The sneer was unmistakable. Robin met it full.

"Not for one moment, sir. I was on my way to Derby. I could have saved a few miles if I had struck north long ago. But Chartley is interesting in these days."

(He saw Mr. Bourgoign's eyes gleam with satisfaction.)

"That is honest at least, sir. And why is Chartley interesting?"

"Because her Grace is here," answered Robin with sublime simplicity.

Sir Amyas barked again. It seemed he liked this way of talk. For a moment or two his eyes searched Robin—hard, narrow eyes like a dog's; he looked him up and down.

"Where are your drugs, sir?"

Robin smiled.

"A herbalist does not need to carry drugs," he said. "They grow in every hedgerow if a man has eyes to see what God has given him."

"That is true enough. I would we had more talk about God His Majesty in this household, and less of popish trinkets and fiddle-faddle. . . . Well, sir; do you think you can cure her ladyship?"

"I have no opinion on the point at all, sir. I do not know what is the matter with her—beyond what Mr. Bourgoign has told me," he added hastily, remembering the supposed situation.

The soldier paid no attention. Like all slow-witted men, he was following up an irrelevant train of thought from his own last sentence but one.

"Fiddle-faddle!" he said again. "I am sick of her megrims and her vapours and her humours. Has she not blood and bones like the rest of us? And yet she cannot take her food nor her drink, nor sleep like an honest woman. And I do not wonder at it; for that is what she is not. They will say she is poisoned, I dare-

say. . . . Well, sir; I suppose you had best see her; but in my presence, remember, sir; in my presence."

Robin's spirits sank like a stone. . . . Moreover, he would be instantly detected as a knave (though that honestly seemed a lesser matter to him), if he attempted to talk medically in Sir Amyas' presence; unless that warrior was truly as great a clod as he seemed. He determined to risk it. He bowed.

"I can at least try my poor skill, sir," he said.

Sir Amyas instantly turned, with a jerk of his head to beckon them, and clanked out again into the hall. There was not a moment's opportunity for the two conspirators to exchange even a word; for there, in the hall, stood the two men who had brought Robin in, to keep guard; and as the party passed through to the foot of the great staircase, he saw on each landing that was in sight another sentry, and, at a door at the end of the overhead gallery, against which hung a heavy velvet curtain, stood the last, a stern figure to keep guard on the rooms of a Queen, with his body-armour complete, a steel hat on his head and a pike in his hand.

It was to this door that Sir Amyas went, acknowledging with a lift of the finger the salute of his men. (It was plain that this place was under strict military discipline.) With the two, the real and the false physician following him, he pulled aside the curtain and rapped imperiously on the door. It was opened after a moment's delay by a frightened-faced woman.

"Her Grace?" demanded the officer sharply. "Is she still abed?"

"Her Grace is risen, sir," said the woman tremulously; "she is in the inner room."

Sir Amyas strode straight on, pulled aside a second curtain hanging over the further door, rapped upon that, too, and without even waiting for an answer this time, beyond the shrill barking of dogs within, opened it and passed in. Mr. Bourgoign followed; and Robin came last. The door closed softly behind him.

III.

The room was furnished with more decency than any he had seen in this harsh house; for, although at the time he thought that he had no eyes for anything but one figure which it contained, he found himself afterwards able to give a very tolerable account of its general appearance. The walls were hung throughout with a dark-blue velvet hanging, stamped with silver fleur-de-lys. There were tapestries on the floor, between which gleamed the polished oak boards, perfectly kept, by the labours (no doubt) of her Grace's two women (since such things would be mere "fiddle-faddle" to the honest soldier); a graceful French table ran down the centre of the room, very delicately carved, and beneath it two baskets from which looked out the indignant heads of a couple of little spaniels; upon it, at the nearer end, were three or four cages of turtle-doves, melancholy-looking in this half-lit room; old, sun-bleached curtains of the same material as that which hung on the walls, shrouded the two windows on the right, letting but a half light into the room: there was a further door, also curtained, diagonally opposite that by which the party had entered; and in the centre of the same wall a tall blue canopy, fringed

with silver, rose to the ceiling. Beneath it, on a dais of a single step, stood a velvet chair, with gilded arms, and worked with the royal shield in the embroidery of the back—with a crowned lion *sejant, guardant*, for the crest above the crown. Half a dozen more chairs were ranged about the table; and, on a couch, with her feet swathed in draperies, with a woman standing over her behind, as if she had just risen up from speaking in her ear, lay the Queen of the Scots. A tall silver and ebony crucifix, with a couple of velvet-bound, silver-clasped little books, stood on the table within reach of her hand, and a folded handkerchief beside them.

Mary was past her prime long ago; she was worn with sorrow and slanders and miseries; yet she appeared to the priest's eyes, even then, like a figure of a dream. It was partly, no doubt, the faintness of the light that came in through the half-shrouded windows that obliterated the lines and fallen patches that her face was beginning to bear; and she lay, too, with her back even to such light as there was. Yet for all that, and even if he had not known who she was, Robin could not have taken his eyes from her face. She lay there like a fallen flower, pale as a lily, beaten down at last by the waves and storms that had gone over her; and she was more beautiful in her downfall and disgrace, a thousand times, than when she had come first to Holyrood, or danced in the Courts of France.

Now it is not in the features one by one that beauty lies, but rather in the coincidence of them all. Her face was almost waxen now, blue shadowed beneath the two waves of pale hair; she had a small mouth, a delicate nose, and large, searching hazel eyes. Her head-dress

was of white, with silver pins in it; a light white shawl was clasped crosswise over her shoulders; and she wore a loose brocaded dressing-gown beneath it. Her hands, clasped as if in prayer, emerged out of deep lace-fringed sleeves, and were covered with rings. But it was the air of almost superhuman delicacy that breathed from her most forcibly; and, when she spoke, a ring of assured decision revealed her quiet consciousness of royalty. It was an extraordinary mingling of fragility and power, of which this feminine and royal room was the proper frame.

Sir Amyas knelt perfunctorily, as if impatient of it; and rose up again at once without waiting for the signal. Mary lifted her fingers a little as a sign to the other two.

"I have brought the French doctor, madam," said the soldier abruptly. "But he must see your Grace in my presence."

"Then you might as well have spared him, and yourself, the pains, sir," came the quiet, dignified voice. "I do not choose to be examined in your presence."

Robin lifted his eyes to her face; but although he thought he caught an under air of intense desire towards him and that which he bore, there was no faltering in the tone of her voice. It was, as some man said, as "soft as running water heard by night."

"This is absurd, madam. I am responsible for your Grace's security and good health. But there are lengths——"

"You have spoken the very word," said the Queen. "There are lengths to which none of us should go, even to preserve our health."

"I tell you, madam——"

"There is no more to be said, sir," said the Queen, closing her eyes again.

"But what do I know of this fellow? How can I tell he is what he professes to be?" barked Sir Amyas.

"Then you should never have admitted him at all," said the Queen, opening her eyes again. "And I will do the best that I can——"

"But, madam, your health is my care; and Mr. Bourgoign here tells me——"

"The subject does not interest me," murmured the Queen, apparently half asleep.

"But I will retire to the corner and turn my back, if that is necessary," growled the soldier.

There was no answer. She lay with closed eyes, and her woman began again to fan her gently.

Robin began to understand the situation a little better. It was plain that Sir Amyas was a great deal more anxious for the Queen's health than he pretended to be, or he would never have tolerated such objections. The Queen, too, must know of this, or she would not have ventured, with so much at stake, to treat him with such maddening rebuffs. There had been rumours (verified later) that Elizabeth had actually caused it to be suggested to Sir Amyas that he should poison his prisoner decently and privately, and thereby save a great deal of trouble and scandal; and that Sir Amyas had refused with indignation. Perhaps, if all this were true, thought Robin, the officer was especially careful on this very account that the Queen's health should be above suspicion. He remembered that Sir Amyas had referred just now

to a suspicion of poison. . . . He determined on the bold line.

"Her Grace has spoken, sir," he said modestly. "And I think I should have a word to say. It is plain to me, by looking at her Grace, that her health is very far from what it should be—" (he paused significantly) —"I should have to make a thorough examination, if I prescribed at all; and, even should her Grace consent to this being done publicly, for my part I would not consent. I should be happy to have her women here, but——"

Sir Amyas turned on him wrathfully.

"Why, sir, you said downstairs——"

"I had not then seen her Grace. But there is no more to be said——" He kneeled again as if to take his leave, stood up and began to retire to the door. Mr. Bourgoign stood helpless.

Then Sir Amyas yielded.

"You shall have fifteen minutes, sir. No more," he cried harshly. "And I shall remain in the next room."

He made a perfunctory salute and strode out.

The Queen opened her eyes, waited for one tense instant till the door closed; then she slipped swiftly off the couch.

"The door!" she whispered.

The woman was across the room in an instant, on tiptoe, and drew the single slender bolt. The Queen made a sharp gesture; the woman fled back again on one side, and out through the further door, and the old man hobbled after her. It was as if every detail had been rehearsed. The door closed noiselessly.

Then the Queen rose up, as Robin, understanding,

began to fumble with his breast. And, as he drew out the pyx, and placed it on the handkerchief (in reality a corporal), apparently so carelessly laid by the crucifix, Mary sank down in adoration of her Lord.

"Now, *mon père*," she whispered, still kneeling, but lifting her star-bright eyes. And the priest went across to the couch where the Queen had lain, and sat down on it.

"*In nomine Patris et Filii et Spiritus Sancti——*" began Mary.

IV.

When the confession was finished, Robin went across, at the Queen's order, and tapped with his finger-nail upon the door, while she herself remained on her knees. The door opened instantly, and the two came in, the woman first, bearing two lighted tapers. She set these down one on either side of the crucifix, and herself knelt with the old physician.

. . . Then Robin gave holy communion to the Queen of the Scots. . . .

V.

She was back again on her couch now, once more as drowsy-looking as ever. The candlesticks were gone again; the handkerchief still in its place, and the woman back again behind the couch. The two men kneeled close beside her, near enough to hear every whisper.

"Listen, gentlemen," she said softly, "I cannot tell you what you have done for my soul to-day—both of you, since I could never have had the priest without my friend. . . . I cannot reward you, but our Lord will do so abundantly. . . . Listen, I know that I am going to my death, and I thank God that I have made my peace with Him. I do not know if they will allow me to see a priest again. But I wish to say this to both of you—as I said just now in my confession, to you, *mon père*—that I am wholly and utterly guiltless of the plot laid to my charge; that I had neither part nor wish nor consent in it. I desired only to escape from my captivity. . . . I would have made war, if I could, yes; but as for accomplishing or assisting in her Grace's death, the thought was never near me. Those whom I thought my friends have entrapped me, and have given colour to the tale. I pray our Saviour to forgive them as I do; and with that Saviour now in my breast I tell you—and you may tell all the world if you will—that I am guiltless of what they impute to me. I shall die for my Religion, and nothing but that. And I thank you again, *mon père, et vous, mon ami, que vous avez . . .*"

Her voice died away in inaudible French, and her eyes closed.

Robin's eyes were raining tears, but he leaned forward and kissed her hand as it lay on the edge of the couch. He felt himself touched on the shoulder, and he stood up. The old man's eyes, too, were brimming with tears.

"I must let Sir Amyas in," he whispered. "You must be ready."

"What shall I say?"

"Say that you will prescribe privately, to me: and that her Grace's health is indeed delicate, but not gravely impaired. . . . You understand?"

Robin nodded, passing his sleeve over his eyes. The woman touched the Queen's shoulder to rouse her, and Mr. Bourgoign opened the door.

VI.

"And now, sir," said Mr. Bourgoign, as the two passed out from the house half an hour later, "I have one more word to say to you. Listen carefully, if you please, for there is not much time."

He glanced behind him, but the tall figure was gone from the door; there remained only the two pikemen that kept ward over the great house on the steps.

"Come this way," said the physician, and led the priest through into the little walled garden on the south. "He will think we are finishing our consultation."

"I cannot tell you," he said presently, "all that I think of your courage and your wit. You made a bold stroke when you told him you would begone again, unless you could see her Grace alone, and again when you said you had come to Chartley because she was here. And you may go again now, knowing you have comforted a woman in her greatest need. They sent her chaplain from her when she left here for Tixall in July, and she has not had him again yet. She is watched at every point. They have taken all her papers from

her, and have seduced M. Nau, I fear. Did you hear anything of him in town?"

"No," said the priest, "I know nothing of him."

"He is a Frenchman, and had been with her Grace more than ten years. He hath written her letters for her, and been privy to all her counsels. And I fear he hath been seduced from her at last. It was said that Mr. Walsingham was to take him into his house. . . . Well, but we have not time for this. What I have to ask you is whether you could come again to us?"

He peered at the priest almost timorously. Robin was startled.

"Come again?" he said. "Why——"

"You see you have already won to her presence, and Sir Amyas is committed to it that you are a safe man. I shall tell her Grace, too, that she must eat and drink well, and get better, if she would see you again, for that will establish you in Sir Amyas' eyes."

"But will she not have a priest?"

"I know nothing, Mr. Alban. They even shut me up here when they took her to Tixall; and even now none but myself and her two women have access to her. I do not know even if her Grace will be left here. There has been talk among the men of going to Fotheringay. I know nothing, from day to day. It is a . . . a *cauchemar*. But they will certainly do what they can to shake her. It grows more rigorous every day. And I thought, that if you would tell me whether a message could reach you, and if her chaplain is not allowed to see her again, you might be able to come again. I would tell Sir Amyas how much good you had done to her last time, with

your herbs; and, it might be, you could see her again in a month or two perhaps—or later.”

Robin was silent.

The greatness of the affair terrified him; yet its melancholy drew him. He had seen her on whom all England bent its thoughts at this time, who was a crowned Queen, with broad lands and wealth, who called Elizabeth “sister;” yet who was more of a prisoner than any in the Fleet or Westminster Gatehouse, since those at least could have their friends to come to them. Her hidden fires, too, had warmed him—that passion for God that had burst from her when her gaoler left her, and she had flung herself on her knees before her hidden Saviour. It may be he had doubted her before (he did not know); but there was no more doubt in him after her protestation of her innocence. He began to see now that she stood for more than her kingdom or her son or the plots attributed to her, that she was more than a mere great woman, for whose sake men could both live and die; he began to see in her that which poor Anthony had seen—a champion for the Faith of them all, an incarnate suffering symbol, in flesh and blood, of that Religion for which he, too, was in peril—that Religion, which, in spite of all clamour to the contrary, was the real storm-centre of England’s life.

He turned then to the old man with a suddenly flushed face.

“A message will always reach me at Mistress Manners’ house, at Booth’s Edge, near Hathersage, in Derbyshire. And I will come from there, or from the world’s end, to serve her Grace.”

CHAPTER V.

I.

"FIRST give me your blessing, Mr. Alban," said Marjorie, kneeling down before him in the hall in front of them all. She was as pale as a ghost, but her eyes shone like stars.

It was a couple of months after his leaving Chartley before he came at last to Booth's Edge. First he had had to bestow Mr. Arnold in Lancashire, for suspicion was abroad; and it was a letter from Marjorie herself, reaching him in Derby, at Mr. Biddell's house, that had told him of it, and bidden him go on with his friend. The town had never been the same since Topcliffe's visit; and now that Babington House was no longer in safe Catholic hands, a great protection was gone. He had better go on, she said, as if he were what he professed to be—a gentleman travelling with his servant. A rumour had come to her ears that the talk in the town was of the expected arrival of a new priest to take Mr. Garlick's place for the present, and every stranger was scrutinised. So he had taken her advice; he had left Derby again immediately, and had slowly travelled north; then, coming round about from the north, after leaving his friend,

saying mass here and there where he could, crossing into Yorkshire even as far west as Wakefield, he had come at last, through this wet November day, along the Derwent valley and up to Booth's Edge, where he arrived after sunset, to find the hall filled with folks to greet him.

He was smiling himself, though his eyes were full of tears, by the time that he had done giving his blessings. Mr. John FitzHerbert was come up from Padley, where he lived now for short times together, greyer than ever, but with the same resolute face. Mistress Alice Babington was there, still serene looking, but with a new sorrow in her eyes; and, clinging to her, a thin, pale girl all in black, who only two months before had lost both daughter and husband; for the child had died scarcely a week or two before her father, Anthony Babington, had died miserably on the gallows near St. Giles' Fields, where he had so often met his friends after dark. It was a ghastly tale, told in fragments to Robin here and there during his journeyings by men in taverns, before whom he must keep a brave face. And a few farmers were there, old Mr. Merton among them, come in to welcome the son of the Squire of Matstead, returned under a feigned name, unknown even to his father, and there, too, was honest Dick Sampson, come up from Dethick to see his old master. So here, in the hall he knew so well, himself splashed with red marl from ankle to shoulder, still cloaked and spurred, one by one these knelt before him, beginning with Marjorie herself, and ending with the youngest farm-boy, who breathed heavily as he knelt down, and got up round-eyed and staring.

"And his Reverence will hear confessions," proclaimed

Marjorie to the multitude, "at eight o'clock to-night; and he will say mass and give holy communion at six o'clock to-morrow morning."

II.

He had to hear that night, after supper, and before he went to keep his engagement in the chapel-room, the entire news of the county; and, in his turn, to tell his own adventures. The company sat together before the great hall-fire, to take the dessert, since there would have been no room in the parlour for all who wished to hear. (He heard the tale of Mr. Thomas FitzHerbert, traitor, apostate and sworn man of her Grace, later, when he had come down again from the chapel-room, and the servants had gone.) But now it was of less tragic matters, and more triumphant, that they talked: he told of his adventures since he had landed in August; of his riding in Lancashire and Yorkshire, and of the fervour that he met with there (in one place, he said, he had reconciled the old minister of the parish, that had been made priest under Mary thirty years ago, and now lay dying); but he said nothing at that time of what he had seen of her Grace of Scotland, and Chartley: and the rest, on the other hand, talked of what had passed in Derby, of all that Mr. Ludlam and Mr. Garlick had done; of the arrest and banishment of the latter, and his immediate return; of the hanging of Mr. Francis Ingolby, in York, which had made a great stir in the north that summer, since he was the son of Sir Francis, of Ripley Castle; as well as of the deaths

of many others—Mr. Finglow in August; Mr. Sandys, in the same month, in Gloucester; and of Mr. Lowe, Mr. Adams and Mr. Dibdale, all together at Tyburn, the news of which had but just come to Derbyshire; and of Mistress Clitheroe, that had been pressed to death in York, for the very crime which Mistress Marjorie Manners was perpetrating at this moment, namely, the assistance and harbourage of priests; or, rather, for refusing to plead when she had been arrested for that crime, lest she should bring them into trouble.

And then at last they began to speak of Mary in Fotheringay; and at that a maid came in to say that it was eight o'clock, and would his Reverence come up, as a few had to travel home that night and to come again next day. . . .

It was after nine o'clock before he came downstairs again, to find the gentlefolk alone in the little parlour that opened from the hall. It gave him a strange thrill of pleasure to see them there in the firelight; the four of them only—Mr. John in the midst, with the three ladies; and an empty chair waiting for the priest. He would hear their confessions presently when the servants were gone to bed. A great mug of warm ale stood by his place, to comfort him after his long ride and his spiritual labours.

Mr. John told him first the news of his own son, as was his duty to do; and he told it without bitterness, in a level voice, leaning his cheek on his hand.

It appeared that Mr. Thomas still passed for a Catholic among the simpler folk; but with none else. All the great houses round about had the truth as an

open secret; and their doors were closed to him; neither had any priest been near him, since the day when Mr. Simpson met him alone on the moors and spoke to him of his soul. Even then Mr. Thomas had blustered and declared that there was no truth in the tale; and had so ridden away at last, saying that such pestering was enough to make a man lose his religion altogether.

"As for me," said Mr. John, "he has not been near me, nor I near him. He lives at Norbury for the most part. My brother is attempting to set aside the disposition he had made in his favour; but they say that it will be made to stand; and that my son will get it all yet. But he has not troubled us at Padley; nor will he, I think."

"He is at Norbury, you say, sir?"

"Yes; but he goes here and there continually. He has been to London to lay informations, I have no doubt, for I know that he hath been seen there in Topcliffe's company. . . . It seems that we are to be in the thick of the conflict. We have had above a dozen priests in this county alone arraigned for treason, and the most of them executed."

His voice had gone lower, and trembled once or twice as he talked. It was plain that he could not bear to speak much more against the son that had turned against him and his Faith, for the sake of his own liberty and the estates he had hoped to have. Robin made haste to turn the talk.

"And my father, sir?"

Mr. John looked at him tenderly.

"You must ask Mistress Marjorie of him," he said. "I have not seen him these three years."

Robin turned to the girl.

"I have had no more news of him since what I wrote to you," she said quietly. "After I had spoken with him, and he had given me the warning, he held himself aloof."

"Hath he been at any of the trials at Derby?"

She bowed her head.

"He was at the trial of Mr. Garlick," she said; "last year; and was one of those who spoke for his banishment."

And then, on a sudden, Mistress Alice moved in her corner, where she sat with the widow of her brother.

"And what of her Grace?" she said. "Is it true what Dick told us before supper, that Parliament hath sentenced her?"

Robin shook his head.

"I hear so much gossip," he said, "in the taverns, that I believe nothing. I had not heard that. Tell me what it was."

He was in a torment of mind as to what he should say of his own adventure at Chartley. On the one side it was plain that no rumour of the tale must get abroad or he would never be able to come to her again; on the other side, no word had come from Mr. Bourgoign, though two months had passed. He knew, indeed, what all the world knew by now, that a trial had been held by over forty lords in Fotheringay Castle, whither the Queen had been moved at the end of September, and that reports had been sent of it to London. But for the rest he knew no more than the others. Tales ran about the country on every side. One man would say

that he had it from London direct that Parliament had sentenced her; another that the Queen of England had given her consent too; a third, that Parliament had not dared to touch the matter at all; a fourth, that Elizabeth had pardoned her. But, for Robin, his hesitation largely lay in his knowledge that it was on the Babington plot that all would turn, and that this would have been the chief charge against her; and here, but a yard away from him, in the gloom of the chimney-breast sat Anthony's wife and sister. How could he say that this was so, and yet that he believed her wholly innocent of a crime which he detested. He had dreaded this talk the instant that he had seen them in the hall and heard their names.

But Mistress Alice would not be put off. She repeated what she had said. Dick had come up from Dethick only that afternoon, and was now gone again, so that he could not be questioned; but he had told his mistress plainly that the story in Derby, brought in by couriers, was that Parliament had consented and had passed sentence on her Grace; that her Grace herself had received the news only the day before; but that the warrant was not signed.

"And on what charge?" asked Robin desperately.

Mistress Alice's voice rang out proudly; but he saw her press the girl closer as she spoke.

"That she was privy to the plot which my . . . my brother had a hand in."

Then Robin drew a breath and decided.

"It may be so," he said. "But I do not believe she was privy to it. I spoke with her Grace at Chartley——"

There was a swift movement in the half circle.

"I spoke with her Grace at Chartley," he said. "I went to her under guise of a herbalist: I heard her confession and gave her communion; and she declared publicly, before two witnesses, after she had had communion, that she was guiltless."

Robin was no story-teller; but for half an hour he was forced to become one, until his hearers were satisfied. Even here, in the distant hills, Mary's name was a key to a treasure-house of mysteries. It was through this country, too, that she had passed again and again. It was at old Chatsworth—the square house with the huge Italian and Dutch gardens, that a Cavendish had bought thirty years ago from the Agards—that she had passed part of her captivity; it was in Derby that she had halted for a night last year; it was near Burton that she had slept two months ago on her road to Fotheringay; and to hear now of her, from one who had spoken to her that very autumn, was as a revelation. So Robin told it as well as he could.

"And it may be," he said, "that I shall have to go again. Mr. Bourgoign said that he would send to me if he could. But I have heard no word from him." (He glanced round the watching faces.) "And I need not say that I shall hear no word at all, if the tale I have told you leak out."

"Perhaps she hath a chaplain again," said Mr. John, after a pause.

"I do not think so," said the priest. "If she had none at Chartley, she would all the less have one at Fotheringay."

"And it may be you will be sent for again?" asked Marjorie's voice gently from the darkness.

"It may be so," said the priest.

"The letter is to be sent here?" she asked.

"I told Mr. Bourgoign so."

"Does any other know you are here?"

"No, Mistress Marjorie."

There was a pause.

"It is growing late," said Mr. John. "Will your Reverence go upstairs with me; and these ladies will come after, I think."

III.

If it had been a great day for Robin that he should come back to his own country after six years, and be received in this house of strange memories; that he should sit upstairs as a priest, and hear confessions in that very parlour where nearly seven years ago he had sat with Marjorie as her accepted lover—if all this had been charged, to him, with emotions and memories which, however he had outgrown them, yet echoed somewhere wonderfully in his mind; it was no less a kind of climax and consummation to the girl whose house this was, and who had waited so long to receive back a lover who came now in so different a guise.

But it must be made plain that to neither of them was there a thought or a memory that ought not to be. To those who hold that men are no better, except for their brains, than other animals; that they are but, after all, bundles of sense from which all love and aspiration

take their rise—to such the thing will seem simply false. They will say that it was not so; that all that strange yearning that Marjorie had to see the man back again; that the excitement that beat in Robin's heart as he had ridden up the well-remembered slope, all in the dark, and had seen the lighted windows at the top; that these were but the old loves in the disguise of piety. But to those who understand what priesthood is, for him that receives it, and for the soul that reverences it, the thing is a truism. For the priest was one who loved Christ more than all the world; and the woman one who loved priesthood more than herself.

Yet her memories of him that remained in her had, of course, a place in her heart; and, though she knelt before him presently in the little parlour where once he had kneeled before her, as simply as a child before her father, and told her sins, and received Christ's pardon, and went away to make room for the next—though all this was without a reproach in her eyes; yet, as she went she knew that she must face a fresh struggle, and a temptation that would not have been one-tenth so fierce if it had been some other priest that was in peril. That peril was Fotheringay, where (as she knew well enough), every strange face would be scrutinised as perhaps nowhere else in all England; and that temptation lay in the knowledge that when that letter should come (as she knew in her heart it would come), it would be through her hands that it would pass—if it passed indeed.

While the others went to the priest one by one,

Marjorie kneeled in her room, fighting with a devil that was not yet come to her, as is the way with sensitive consciences.

CHAPTER VI.

I.

THE suspense at Fotheringay grew deeper with every day that passed.

Christmas was come and gone, and no sign was made from London, so far, at least, as the little town was concerned. There came almost daily from the castle new tales of slights put upon the Queen, and now and again of new favours granted to her. Her chaplain, withdrawn for awhile, had been admitted to her again a week before Christmas; a crowd had collected to see the Popish priest ride in, and had remarked on his timorous air; and about the same time a courier had been watched as he rode off to London, bearing, it was rumoured, one last appeal from one Queen to the other. On the other hand, it was known that Mary no longer had her daïs in her chamber, and that the billiard-table, which she never used, had been taken away again.

But all this had happened before Christmas, and now a month had gone by, and although this or that tale of discourtesy from gaoler to prisoner leaked out through the servants; though it was known that the crucifix which Mary had hung up in the place where her daïs had stood remained undisturbed—though this

argument or the other could be advanced in turn by men sitting over their wine in the taverns, that the Queen's cause was rising or falling, nothing was truly known the one way or the other. It had been proclaimed, by trumpet, in every town in England, that sentence of death was passed; yet this was two or three months ago, and the knowledge that the warrant had not yet been signed seemed an argument to some that now it never would be.

A group was waiting (as a group usually did wait) at the village entrance to the new bridge lately built by her Grace of England, towards sunset on an evening late in January. This situation commanded, so far as was possible, every point of interest. It was the beginning of the London road, up which so many couriers had passed; it was over this bridge that her Grace of Scotland herself had come from her cross-country journey from Chartley. On the left, looking northwards, rose the great old collegiate church, with its graceful lantern tower, above the low thatched stone houses of the village; on the right, adjoining the village beyond the big inn, rose the huge keep of the castle and its walls, within its double moats, ranged in form of a fetterlock of which the river itself was its straight side. Beyond, the low rolling hills and meadows met the chilly January sky.

For four months now the village had been transformed into a kind of camp. The castle itself was crammed to bursting. The row of little windows beside the hall on the first floor, visible only from the road that led past the inn parallel to the river, marked the

lodgings of the Queen, where, with the hall also for her use, she lived continually; the rest of the castle was full of men-at-arms, officers, great lords who came and went—these, with the castellan's rooms and those of his people, Sir Amyas' lodgings, and the space occupied by Mary's own servants—all these filled the castle entirely. For the rest—the garrison not on duty, the grooms, the couriers, the lesser servants, the suites of the visitors, and even many of the visitors themselves—these filled the two inns of the little town completely, and overflowed everywhere into the houses of the people. It was a vision of a garrison in war-time that the countryfolk gaped at continually; the street sparkled all day with liveries and arms; archers went to and fro; the trample of horses, the sharp military orders at the changings of guard outside and within the towered gateway that commanded the entrance over the moats, the songs of men over their wine in the tavern-parlours—these things had become matters of common observation, and fired many a young farm-man with a zeal for arms.

The Queen herself was a mystery.

They had seen, for a moment, as she drove in after dark last September, a coach (in which, it was said, she had sat with her back to the horses) surrounded by guards; patient watchers had, perhaps, half a dozen times altogether caught a glimpse of a woman's face, at a window that was supposed to be hers, look out for an instant over the wall that skirted the moat. But that was all. They heard the trumpets' cry within the castle; and even learned to distinguish something of what each signified—the call for the changing of guards, the announcement of dinner and supper; the warning to the

gatekeepers that persons were to pass out. But of her, round whom all this centred, of the prison-queen of this hive of angry bees, they knew less than of her Grace of England whom once they had seen ride in through these very gates. Tales, of course, were abundant—gossip from servant to servant, filtering down at last, distorted or attenuated, to the rustics who watched and exclaimed; but there was not a soldier who kept her, not a cook who served her, of whom they did not know more than of herself. There were even parties in the village; or, rather, there was a silent group who did not join in the universal disapproval, but these were queer and fantastic persons, who still held to the old ways and would not go to church with the rest.

' A little more material had been supplied for conversation by the events of to-day. It had positively been reported, by a fellow who had been to see about a room for himself in the village, that he had been turned out of the castle to make space for her Grace's chaplain. This was puzzling. Had not the Popish priest already been in the castle five or six weeks? Then why should he now require another chamber?

The argument waxed hot by the bridge. One said that it was another priest that was come in disguise; another, that once a Popish priest got a foothold in a place he was never content till he got the whole for himself; a third, that the fellow had simply lied, and that he was turned out because he had been caught by Sir Amyas making love to one of the maids. Each was positive of his own thesis, and argued for it by the process of re-assertion that it was so, and that his

opponents were fools. They spat into the water; one got out a tobacco pipe that a soldier had given him and made a great show of filling it, though he had no flint to light it with; another proclaimed that for two figs he would go and enquire at the gateway itself. . . .

To this barren war of the schools came a fact at last, and its bearer was a gorgeous figure of a man-at-arms (who, later, got into trouble by talking too much), who came swaggering down the road from the New Inn, blowing smoke into the air, with his hat on one side, and his breast-piece loose; and declared in that strange clipped London-English of his that he had been on guard at the door of Sir Amyas' room, and had heard him tell Melville the steward and De Préau the priest that they must no longer have access to her Grace, but must move their lodgings elsewhere within the castle.

This, then, had to be discussed once more from the beginning. One said that this was an evident sign that the end was to come and that Madam was to die; another that, on the contrary, it was plain that this was not so, but that rather she was to be compelled by greater strictness to acknowledge her guilt; a third, that it was none of these things, but, rather that Madam was turning Protestant at last in order to save her life, and had devised this manner of ridding herself of the priest. And the soldier damned them all round as block-fools, who knew nothing and talked all the more for it.

The dark was beginning to fall before the group broke up, and none of them took much notice of a

young man on a fresh horse, who rode quietly out of the yard of the New Inn as the saunterers came up. One of them, three minutes later, however, heard suddenly from across the bridge the sound of a horse breaking into a gallop and presently dying away westwards beyond Perry Lane.

II.

Within the castle that evening nothing happened that was of any note to its more careless occupants. All was as usual.

The guard at the towers that controlled the draw-bridge across the outer moat was changed at four o'clock; six men came out, under an officer, from the inner court; the words were exchanged, and the six that went off duty marched in to the armoury to lay by their pikes and presently dispersed, four to their rooms in the east side of the quadrangle, two to their quarters in the village. From the kitchen came the clash of dishes. Sir Amyas came out from the direction of the keep, where he had been conferring with Mr. FitzWilliam, the castellan, and passed across to his lodging on the south. A butcher hurried in, under escort of a couple of men from the gate, with a covered basket and disappeared into the kitchen entry. All these things were observed idly by the dozen guards who stood two at each of the five doors that gave upon the courtyard. Presently, too, hardly ten minutes after the guard was changed, three figures came out at the staircase foot where Sir Amyas had just gone in, and stood there apparently

talking in low voices. Then one of them, Mr. Melville, the Queen's steward, came across the court with Mr. Bourgoign towards the outer entrance, passed under it, and presently Mr. Bourgoign came back and wheeled sharply in to the right by the entry that led up to the Queen's lodging. Meanwhile the third figure, whom one of the men had thought to be M. de Préau, had gone back again towards Mr. Melville's rooms.

That was all that was to be seen, until half an hour later, a few minutes before the drawbridge was raised for the night, the steward came back, crossed the court once more and vanished into the entry opposite.

It was about this time that the young man had ridden out from the New Inn.

Then the sun went down; the flambeaux were lighted beneath the two great entrances—in the towered archway across the moat, and the smaller vaulted archway within, as well as one more flambeau stuck into the iron ring by each of the four more court-doors, and lights began to burn in the windows round about. The man at Sir Amyas' staircase looked across the court and idly wondered what was passing in the rooms opposite on the first floor where the Queen was lodged. He had heard that the priest had been forced to change his room, and was to sleep in Mr. Melville's for the present; so her Grace would have to get on without him as well as she could. There would be no Popish mass to-morrow, then, in the oratory that he had heard was made upstairs. . . . He marvelled at the superstition that made this a burden. . . .

At a quarter before six a trumpet blew, and presently the tall windows of the hall across the court from

him began to kindle. That was for her Grace's supper to be served. At five minutes to six another trumpet sounded, and M. Landet, the Queen's butler, hurried out with his white rod to take his place for the entrance of the dishes. Finally, through the ground-floor window at the foot of the Queen's stair, the man caught a glimpse of moving figures passing towards the hall. That would be her Grace going in state to her supper with her women; but, for the first time, without either priest to say grace or steward to escort her. He saw, too, the couple of guards under the inner archway come to the salute as the little procession came for an instant within their view; and Mr. Newrins, the butler of the castle, stop suddenly and pull off his cap as he was hurrying in to be in time for the supper of the gentlemen that was served in the keep half an hour after the Queen's.

Meanwhile, ten miles away, along the Uppingham and Leicester track, rode a young man through the dark.

III.

Sunday, too, passed as usual.

At half-past eight the bells of the church pealed out for the morning service, and the village street was thronged with worshippers and a few soldiers. At nine o'clock they ceased, and the street was empty. At eleven o'clock the trumpets sounded to announce change of guard, and to tell the kitchen folk that dishing-time was come. Half an hour later once more the little pro-

cession glinted a moment through the ground-floor window of the Queen's stair as her Grace went to dinner. (She was not very well, the cooks had reported, and had eaten but little last night.) At twelve o'clock she came out again and went upstairs, and at the same time, in Leicester, a young man, splashed from head to foot, slipped off a draggled and exhausted horse and went into an inn, ordering a fresh horse to be ready for him at three o'clock.

And so once more the sun went down, and the little rituals were performed, and the guards were changed, and M. Landet, for the last time in his life (though he did not know it), came out from the kitchen with his white rod to bear it before the dishes of a Queen; and Sir Amyas walked in from the orchard and was saluted, and Mr. FitzWilliam went his rounds, and the drawbridge was raised. And, at the time that the drawbridge was raised, a young man on a horse was wondering when he should see the lights of Burton. . . .

IV.

The first that Mistress Manners knew of his coming in the early hours of Monday morning, was when she was awakened by Janet in the pitch darkness shaking her shoulder.

"It is a young man," she said, "on foot. His horse fell five miles off. He is come with a letter from Derby."

Sleep fell from Marjorie like a cloak. This kind of thing had happened to her before. Now and then

such a letter would come from a priest who lacked money or desired a guide or information. She sprang out of bed and began to put on her outer dress and her hooded cloak, as the night was cold.

"Bring him into the hall," she said. "Get beer and some food, and blow the fire up."

Janet vanished.

When the mistress came down five minutes later, all had been done as she had ordered. The turf and wood fire leaped in the chimney; a young man, still with his hat on his head and drawn down a little over his face, was sitting over the hearth, steaming like a kettle, eating voraciously. Janet was waiting discreetly by the doors. Marjorie nodded to her, and she went out; she had learned that her mistress's secrets were not always her own as well.

"I am Mistress Manners," she said. "You have a letter for me?"

The young man stood up.

"I know you well enough, mistress," he said. "I am John Merton's son."

Marjorie's heart leaped with relief. In spite of her determination that this must be a letter from a priest, there had still thrust itself before her mind the possibility that it might be that other letter whose coming she had feared. She had told herself fiercely as she came downstairs just now, that it could not be. No news was come from Fotheringay all the winter; it was common knowledge that her Grace had a priest of her own. And now that this was John Merton's son——

She smiled.

"Give me the letter," she said. "I should have known you, too, if it were not for the dark."

"Well, mistress," he said, "the letter was to be delivered to you, Mr. Melville said; but——"

"Who?"

"Mr. Melville, mistress: her Grace's steward at Fotheringay."

He talked on a moment or two, beginning to say that Mr. Melville himself had come out to the inn; that he, as Melville's own servant, had been lodging there, and had been bidden to hold himself in readiness, since he knew Derbyshire. . . . But she was not listening. She only knew that that had fallen which she feared.

"Give me the letter," she said again.

He sat down, excusing himself, and fumbled with his boot; and by the time that he held it out to her, she was in the thick of the conflict. She knew well enough what it meant—that there was no peril in all England like that to which this letter called her friend, there, waiting for him in Fotheringay where every strange face was suspected, where a Popish priest was as a sheep in a den of wolves, where there would be no mercy at all if he were discovered; and where, if he were to be of use at all, he must adventure himself in the very spot where he would be most suspected, on a task that would be thought the last word in treason and disobedience. And, worst of all, this priest had lodged in the tavern where the conspirators had lodged; he had talked with them the night before their flight, and now, here he was, striving to get access to her for

whom all had been designed. Was there a soul in England that could doubt his complicity? . . . And it was to her own house here in Derbyshire that he had come for shelter; it was here that he had said mass yesterday; and it must be from this house that he must ride, on one of her horses; and it must be her hand that gave him the summons. Last of all, it was she, Marjorie Manners, that had sent him to this life, six years ago.

Then, as she took the letter, the shrewd woman in her spoke. It was irresistible, and she seemed to listen to a voice that was not hers.

"Does any here know that you are come?"

"No, mistress."

"If I bade you, and said that I had reasons for it, you would ride away again alone, without a word to any?"

"Why yes, mistress!"

(Oh! the plan was irresistible and complete. She would send this messenger away again on one of her own horses as far as Derby; he could leave the horse there, and she would send a man for it to-morrow. He would go back to Fotheringay and would wait, he and those that had sent him. And the priest they expected would not come. He, too, himself, had ceased to expect any word from Mr. Bourgoign; he had said a month ago that surely none would come now. He had been away from Booth's Edge, in fact, for nearly a month, and had scarcely even asked on his return last Saturday to Padley, whether any message had come. Why, it was complete—complete and irresistible! She would burn the letter here in this hall-fire when the

man was gone again; and say to Janet that the letter had been from a travelling priest that was in trouble, and that she had sent the answer. And Robin would presently cease to look for news, and the end would come, and there would be no more trouble.)

"Do you know what is in the letter?" she whispered sharply. ("Sit down again and go on eating.")

He obeyed her.

"Yes, mistress," he said. "The priest was taken from her on Saturday. Mr. Bourgoign had arranged all in readiness for that."

"You said Mr. Melville."

"Mr. Melville is a Protestant, mistress; but he is very well devoted to her Grace, and has done as Mr. Bourgoign wished."

"Why must her Grace have a priest at once? Surely for a few days——"

He glanced up at her, and she, conscious of her own falseness, thought he looked astonished.

"I mean that they will surely give her her priest back again presently; and"—(her voice faltered)—"and Mr. Alban is spent with his travelling."

"They mean to kill her, mistress. There is no doubt of it amongst those of us that are Catholics. And it is that she may have a priest before she dies, that——"

He paused.

"Yes?" she said.

"Her Grace had a fit of crying, it is said, when her priest was taken from her. Mr. Melville was crying himself, even though——"

He stopped, himself plainly affected.

Then, in a great surge, her own heart rose up, and she understood what she was doing. As in a vision, she saw her own mother crying out for the priest that never came; and she understood that horror of darkness that falls on one who, knowing what the priest can do, knowing the infinite consolations which Christ gives, is deprived, when physical death approaches, of that tremendous strength and comfort. Indeed, she recognised to the full that when a priest cannot be had, God will save and forgive without him; yet what would be the heartlessness, to say nothing of the guilt, of one that would keep him away? For what, except that this strength and comfort might be at the service of Christ's flock, had her own life been spent? It was expressly for this that she had lived on in England when peace and the cloister might be hers elsewhere; and now that her own life was touched, should she fail? . . . The blindness passed like a dream, and her soul rose up again on a wave of pain and exaltation. . . .

"Wait," she said. "I will go and awaken him, and bid him come down."

v.

An hour later, as the first streaks of dawn slit the sky to the eastwards over the moors, she stood with Janet and Mistress Alice and Robin by the hall-fire.

She had said not a word to any of the struggle she had passed through. She had gone upstairs resolutely and knocked on his door till he had answered,

and then whispered, "The letter is come. . . . I will have food ready;" slipping the letter beneath the door.

Then she had sent Janet to awaken a couple of men that slept over the stables, and bid them saddle two horses at once; and herself had gone to the buttery to make ready a meal. Then Mistress Alice had awakened and come downstairs, and the three women had waited on the priest, as, in boots and cloak, he had taken some food.

Then, as the sound of the horses' feet coming round from the stables at the back had reached them, she had determined to tell Robin before he went of how she had played the coward.

She went out with him to the entry between the hall and the buttery, holding the others back with a glance.

"I near destroyed the letter," she said simply, with downcast eyes, "and sent the man away again. I was afraid of what might fall at Fotheringay. . . . May Christ protect you!"

She said no more than that, but turned and called the others before he could speak.

As he gathered up the reins a moment later, before mounting, the three women kneeled down in the lighted entry and the two farm-men by the horses' heads, and the priest gave them his blessing.

CHAPTER VII.

I.

It was not until after dawn on Wednesday, the twenty-fifth of January, as the bells were ringing in the parish church for the Conversion of St. Paul, that the two draggled travellers rode in over the bridge of Fotheringay, seeing the castle-keep rise grim and grey out of the river-mists on the right; and, passing on, dismounted in the yard of the New Inn. They had had one or two small misadventures by the way, and young Merton, through sheer sleepiness, had so reeled in his saddle on the afternoon of Monday, that the priest had insisted that they should both have at least one good night's rest. But they had ridden all Tuesday night without drawing rein, and Robin, going up to the room that he was to share with the young man, fell upon the bed, and asleep, all in one act.

He was awakened by the trumpets sounding for dinner in the castle-yard, and sat up to find young John looking at him. The news that he brought drove the last shreds of sleep from his brain.

"I have seen Mr. Melville, my master, sir. He bids me say it is useless for Mr. Bourgoign, or anyone else,

to attempt anything with Sir Amyas for the present. Mr. Melville hath spoken to Sir Amyas as to his separation from her Grace, and could get no reason for it. But the same day—it was on Monday—her Grace's butler was forbidden any more to carry the white rod before her dishes. This is as much as to signify, Mr. Melville says, that her Grace's royalty shall no longer protect her. It is their intention, he says, to degrade her first, before they execute her. And we may look for the warrant any day, my master says."

The young man stared at him mournfully.

"And M. de Préau?"

"M. de Préau goes about as a ghost. He will come and speak with your Reverence before the day is out. Meanwhile, Mr. Melville says you may walk abroad freely. Sir Amyas never goes forth of the castle now, and none will notice. But they might take notice, Mr. Melville says, if you were to lie all day in your chamber."

It was after dinner, as Robin rose from the table in a parlour, where he had dined with two or three lawyers and an officer of Mr. FitzWilliam, that John Merton came to him and told him that a gentleman was waiting. He went upstairs and found the priest, a little timorous-looking man, dressed like a minister, pacing quickly to and fro in the tiny room at the top of the house where John and he were to sleep. The Frenchman seized his two hands and began to pour out in an agitated whisper a torrent of French and English. Robin disengaged himself.

"You must sit down, M. de Préau," he said, "and

“speak slowly, or I shall not understand one word. Tell me precisely what I must do. I am here to obey orders—no more. I have no design in my head at all. I will do what Mr. Bourgoign and yourself decide.”

It was pathetic to watch the little priest. He interrupted himself by a thousand apostrophes; he lifted hands and eyes to the ceiling repeatedly; he named his poor mistress saint and martyr; he cried out against the barbarian land in which he found himself, and the bloodthirsty tigers with whom, like a second Daniel, he himself had to consort; he expatiated on the horrible risk that he ran in venturing forth from the castle on such an errand, saying that Sir Amyas would wring his neck like a hen's, if he so much as suspected the nature of his business. He denounced, with feeble venom, the wickedness of these murderers, who would not only slay his mistress's body, but her soul as well, if they could, by depriving her of her priest. Incidentally, however, he disclosed that at present there was no plan at all for Robin's admission. Mr. Bourgoign had sent for him, hoping that he might be able to re-introduce him once more on the same pretext as at Chartley; but the incident of Monday, when the white rod had been forbidden, and the conversation of Sir Amyas to Mr. Melville had made it evident that an attempt at present would be worse than useless.

“You must yourself choose!” he cried, with an abominable accent. “If you will imperil your life by remaining, our Lord will no doubt reward you in

eternity; but, if not, and you flee, not a man will blame you—least of all myself, who would, no doubt, flee too, if I but dared.”

This was frank and humble, at any rate. Robin smiled.

“I will remain,” he said.

The Frenchman seized his hands and kissed them.

“You are a hero and a martyr, monsieur! We will perish together, therefore.”

II.

After the Frenchman’s departure, and an hour’s sleep in that profundity of unconsciousness that follows prolonged effort, Robin put on his sword and hat and cloak, having dressed himself with care, and went slowly out of the inn to inspect the battlefield. He carried himself deliberately, with a kind of assured insolence, as if he had supreme rights in this place, and were one of that crowd of persons—great lords, lawyers, agents of the court—to whom for the last few months Fotheringay had become accustomed. He turned first to the right towards the castle, and presently was passing down its long length.

It looked, indeed, a royal prison. A low wall on his right protected the road from the huge outer moat that ran, in the shape of a fetterlock, completely round all the buildings; and beyond it, springing immediately from the edge of the water, rose the massive outer wall, pierced here and there with windows. He thought that he could make out the tops of the hall windows in one

place, beyond the skirting wall, the pinnacles of the chapel in another, and a row of further windows that might be lodgings in a third; but from without here nothing was certain, except the gigantic keep, that stood high to the west, and the strong towers that guarded the drawbridge; this, as he went by, was lowered to its place, and he could look across it into the archway, where four men stood on guard with their pikes. The inner doors, however, were closed beyond them, and he could see nothing of the inner moat that surrounded the court, nor the yard itself. Neither did he think it prudent to ask any questions, though he looked freely about him; since the part he must play for the present plainly was that of one who had a right here and knew what he did.

He came back to the inn an hour later, after a walk through the village and round the locked church: this was a splendid building, with flying buttresses and a high tower, with exterior carvings of saints and evangelists all in place. But it looked desolate to him, and he was the more dejected, as he seemed no nearer to the Queen than before, and with little chance of getting there. Meanwhile, there was but one thing to be done, and that the hardest of all—to wait. Perhaps in a few days he might get speech with Mr. Bourgoign; yet for the present that, too, as the priest had told him, was out of the question.

III.

Five days were gone by, Sunday had come and gone, and yet there had been no news, except a letter conveyed to him by Merton, written by Mr. Bourgoign himself, telling him that he had news that Mr. Beale, the Clerk of the Council, was to arrive some time that week, and that this presaged the approach of the end. He would, therefore, do his utmost within the next few days to approach Sir Amyas and ask for the admission of the young herbalist who had done her Grace so much good at Chartley. He added that if any question were to be raised as to why he had been so long in the place, and why, indeed, he had come at all, he was to answer fearlessly that Mr. Bourgoign had sent for him.

On the Sunday night Robin could not sleep. Little by little the hideous suspense was acting upon him, and the knowledge that not a hundred yards away from him the wonderful woman whom he had seen at Chartley, the loving and humble Catholic, who had kneeled so ardently before her Lord, the Queen who had received from him the sacraments for which she thirsted—the knowledge that she was breaking her heart, so near, for the consolation which a priest only could give, and that he, a priest, was free to go through all England, except through that towered gateway past which he walked every day—this increased his misery and his longing.

The very day he had been through—the Sunday

on which he could neither say nor even hear mass (for, because of the greatness of that which was at stake, he had thought it wiser to bring with him nothing that could arouse suspicion)—and the hearing of the bells from the church calling to Protestant prayers, and the sight of the crowds going and returning—this brought him lower than he had been since his first coming to England. He lay then in the darkness, turning from side to side, thinking of these things, listening to the breathing of the young man who lay on blankets at the foot of his bed.

About midnight he could lie there no longer. He got out of bed noiselessly, stepped across the other, went to the window-seat and sat down there, staring out, with eyes well accustomed to the darkness, towards the vast outline against the sky which he knew was the keep of the castle. No light burned there to relieve its brutality. It remained there, implacable as English justice, immovable as the heart of Elizabeth and the composure of the gaoler who kept it. . . . Then he drew out Mr. Maine's rosary and began to recite the "Sorrowful Mysteries." . . .

He supposed afterwards that he had begun to doze; but he started, wide-awake, at a sudden glare of light in his eyes, as if a beacon had flared for an instant somewhere within the castle enclosure. It was gone again, however; there remained the steady monstrous mass of building and the heavy sky. Then, as he watched, it came again, without warning and without sound—that same brilliant flare of light, against which the towers and walls stood out pitch-black. A third time it came, and all was dark once more.

In the morning, as he sat over his ale in the tavern below, he listened, without lifting his eyes, engrossed, it seemed, in a little book he was reading, to the excited talk of a group of soldiers. One of them, he said, had been on guard beneath the Queen's windows last night, and between midnight and one o'clock had seen three times a brilliant light explode itself, like soundless gunpowder, immediately over the room where she slept. And this he asserted, over and over again.

IV.

On the following Saturday John Merton came up into the room where the priest was sleeping after dinner and awakened him.

"If you will come at once with me, sir, you can have speech with Mr. Bourgoign. My master has sent me to tell you so; Mr. Bourgoign has leave to go out."

Robin said nothing. It was the kind of opportunity that must not be imperilled by a single word that might be overheard. He threw on his great cloak, buckled his sword on, and followed with every nerve awake. They went up the street leading towards the church, and turned down a little passage-way between two of the larger houses; the young man pushed on a door in the wall; and Robin went through, to find himself in a little enclosed garden with Mr. Bourgoign gathering herbs from the border, not a yard from him. The physician said nothing; he glanced sharply up and pointed to a seat set under the shelter of the wall that hid the greater part of the garden from the house to

which it belonged; and as Robin reached it, Mr. Bourgoign, still gathering his herbs, began to speak in an undertone.

"Do not speak except very softly, if you must," he said. "The Queen is sick again; and I have leave to gather herbs for her in two or three gardens. It was refused to me at first; and then granted afterwards. From that I look for the worst. . . . Beale will come to-morrow, I hear. . . . Paulet refused me leave the first time, I make no doubt, knowing that all was to end within a day or two: then he granted it me, for fear I should suspect his reason. (Can you hear me, sir?)"

Robin nodded. His heart thumped within him.

"Well, sir; I shall tell Sir Amyas to-morrow that my herbs do no good—that I do not know what to give her Grace. I have seen her Grace continually, but with a man in the room always. . . . Her Grace knows that you are here, and bids me thank you with all her heart. . . . I shall speak to Sir Amyas, and shall tell him that you are here: and that I sent for you, but did not dare to ask leave for you until now. If he refuses I shall know that all is finished, and that Beale has brought the warrant with him. . . . If he consents I shall think that it is put off for a little. . . ."

He was very near to Robin now, still, with a critical air pushing the herbs this way and that, selecting one now and again.

"Have you anything to say to me, sir? Do not speak loud. The fellow that conducted me from the castle is drinking ale in the house behind. He did not

know of this door on the side. . . . Have you anything to say?"

"Yes," said Robin.

"What is it?"

"Two things. The first is that I think one of the fellows in the inn is doubtful of me. Merton tells me he has asked a great number of questions about me. What had I best do?"

"Who is he?"

"He is a servant of my lord Shrewsbury's who is in the neighbourhood."

The doctor was silent.

"Am I in danger?" asked the priest quietly. "Shall I endanger her Grace?"

"You cannot endanger her Grace. She is near her end in any case. But for yourself——"

"Yes."

"You are endangering yourself every instant by remaining," said the doctor dryly.

"The second matter——" began Robin.

"But what of yourself——"

"Myself must be endangered," said Robin softly. "The second matter is whether you cannot get me near her Grace in the event of her execution. I could at least give her absolution *sub conditione*."

Mr. Bourgoign shot a glance at him which he could not interpret.

"Sir," he said; "God will reward you. . . . As regards the second matter it will be exceedingly difficult. If it is to be in the open court, I may perhaps contrive it. If it is to be in the hall, none but known persons would be admitted. . . . Have you anything more, sir?"

"No."

"Then you had best be gone again at once. . . . Her Grace prays for you. . . . She had a fit of weeping last night to know that a priest was here and she not able to have him. . . . Do you pray for her. . . ."

v.

Sunday morning dawned; the bells pealed out; the crowds went by the church and came back to dinner; and yet no word had come to the inn. Robin scarcely stirred out all that day for fear a summons should come and he miss it. He feigned a little illness and sat wrapped up in the corner window of the parlour upstairs, whence he could command both roads—that which led to the Castle, and that which led to the bridge over which Mr. Beale must come. He considered it prudent also to do this, because of the fellow of whom Merton had told him—a man that looked like a groom, and who was lent, he heard, with one or two others by his master to do service at the Castle.

Robin's own plan had been distinct ever since M. de Préau had brought him the first message. He bore himself, as has been said, assuredly and confidently; and if he were questioned would simply have said that he had business connected with the Castle. This, asserted in a proper tone, would probably have its effect. There was so much mystery, involving such highly-placed personages from the Queen of England downwards, that discretion was safer than curiosity.

It was growing towards dark when Robin, after long and fruitless staring down the castle road, turned himself to the other. The parlour was empty at this hour except for himself.

He saw the group gathering as usual at the entrance to the bridge to watch the arrivals from London, who, if there were any, generally came about this time.

Then, as he looked, he saw two horsemen mount the further slope of the bridge, and come full into view.

Now there was nothing whatever about these two persons, in outward appearance, to explain the strange effect they had upon the priest. They could not possibly be the party for which he was watching. Mr. Beale would certainly come with a great company. They were, besides, plainly no more than serving men: one wore some kind of a livery; the other, a strongly-built man who sat his horse awkwardly, was in new clothes that did not fit him. They rode ordinary hackneys; and each had luggage strapped behind his saddle. All this the priest saw as they came up the narrow street and halted before the inn door. They might, perhaps, be servants of Mr. Beale; yet that did not seem probable as there was no sign of a following party. The landlord came out onto the steps beneath; and after a word or two, they slipped off their horses wearily, and led them round into the court of the inn.

All this was usual enough; the priest had seen such arrivals a dozen times at this very door; yet he felt sick as he looked at them. There appeared to him something terrible and sinister about them. He had seen the face of the liveried servant; but not of the other: this one had carried his head low, with his great hat

drawn down on his head. The priest wondered, too, what they carried in their trunks.

When he went down to supper in the great room of the inn, he could not forbear looking round for them. But only one was to be seen—the liveried servant who had done the talking.

Robin turned to his neighbour—a lawyer with whom he had spoken a few times.

“That is a new livery to me,” he said, nodding towards the stranger.

“That?” said the lawyer. “That? Why, that is the livery of Mr. Walsingham. I have seen it in London.”

Towards the end of supper a stir broke out among the servants who sat at the lower end of the room near the windows that looked out upon the streets. Two or three sprang up from the tables and went to look out.

“What is that?” cried the lawyer.

“It is Mr. Beale going past, sir,” answered a voice.

Robin lifted his eyes with an effort and looked. Even as he did so there came a trampling of horses’ hoofs; and then, in the light that streamed from the windows there appeared a company on horseback. They were too far away from where he sat, and the lights were too confusing, for him to see more than the general crowd that went by—perhaps from a dozen to twenty all told. But by them ran the heads of men who had waited at the bridge to see them go by; and a murmuring of voices came even through the closed windows. It was plain that others besides those who were close to her Grace, saw a sinister significance in Mr. Beale’s arrival.

VI.

Robin had hardly reached his room after supper and a little dessert in the parlour, before Merton came in. He drew his hand out of his breast as he entered, and, with a strange look, gave the priest a folded letter. Robin took it without a word and read it through.

After a pause he said to the other:

"Who were those two men that came before supper? I saw them ride up."

"There is only one, sir. He is one of Mr. Walsingham's men."

"There were two," said the priest.

"I will enquire, sir," said the young man, looking anxiously from the priest's face to the note and back again.

Robin noticed it.

"It is bad news," he said shortly. "I must say no more. . . . Will you enquire for me; and come and tell me at once."

When the young man had gone Robin read the note again before destroying it.

"I spoke to Sir A. to-day. He will have none of it. He seemed highly suspicious when I spoke to him of you. If you value your safety more than her Grace's possible comfort, you had best leave at once. In any case, use great caution."

Then, in a swift, hurried hand there followed a post-script:

"Mr. B. is just now arrived, and is closeted with Sir A. All is over, I think."

Ten minutes later Merton came back and found the priest still in the same attitude, sitting on the bed.

"They will have none of it, sir," he said. "They say that one only came, in advance of Mr. Beale."

He came a little closer, and Robin could see that he was excited.

"But you are right, sir, for all their lies. I saw supper plates and an empty flagon come down from the stair that leads to the little chamber above the kitchen."

CHAPTER VIII.

I.

OVERHEAD lay the heavy sky of night-clouds like a curved sheet of dark steel, glimmering far away to the left with gashes of pale light. In front towered the twin gateway, seeming in the gloom to lean forward to its fall. Lights shone here and there in the windows, vanished and appeared again, flashing themselves back from the invisible water beneath. About, behind and on either side, there swayed and murmured this huge crowd—invisible in the darkness—peasants, gentlemen, clerks, grooms—all on an equality at last, awed by a common tragedy into silence, except for words exchanged here and there in an undertone, or whispered and left unanswered, or sudden murmured prayers to a God who hid Himself indeed. Now and again, from beyond the veiling walls came the tramp of men; once, three or four brisk notes blown on a horn; once, the sudden rumble of a drum; and once, when the silence grew profound, three or four blows of iron on wood. But at that the murmur rose into a groan and drowned it again. . . .

So the minutes passed. . . . Since soon after midnight the folks had been gathering here. Many had not slept

all night, ever since the report had run like fire through the little town last evening, that the sentence had been delivered to the prisoner. From that time onwards the road that led down past the Castle had never been empty. It was now moving on to dawn, the late dawn of February; and every instant the scene grew more distinct. It was possible for those pushed against the wall, or against the chains of the bridge that had been let down an hour ago, to look down into the chilly water of the moat; to see not the silhouette only of the huge fortress, but the battlements of the wall, and, now and again a steel cap and a pike-point pass beyond it as the sentry went to and fro. Noises within the Castle grew more frequent. The voice of an officer was heard half a dozen times; the rattle of pike-butts, the clash of steel. The melancholy bray of the horn-blower ran up a minor scale and down again; the dub-dub of a drum rang out, and was thrown back in throbs by the encircling walls. The galloping of horses was heard three or four times as a late-comer tore up the village street and was forced to halt far away on the outskirts of the crowd—some country squire, maybe, to whom the amazing news had come an hour ago. Still there was no movement of the great doors across the bridge. The men on guard there shifted their positions; nodded a word or two across to one another; changed their pikes from one hand to the other. It seemed as if day would come, and find the affair no further advanced. . . .

Then, without warning (for so do great climaxes always come), the doors wheeled back on their hinges, disclosing a line of pikemen drawn up under the vaulted entrance; a sharp command was uttered by an officer at

their head, causing the two sentries to advance across the bridge; a great roaring howl rose from the surging crowd; and in an instant the whole lane was in confusion. Robin felt himself pushed this way and that; he struggled violently, driving his elbows right and left; was lifted for a moment clean from his feet by the pressure about him; slipped down again; gained a yard or two; lost them; gained three or four in a sudden swirl; and immediately found his feet on wood instead of earth; and himself racing desperately in a loose group of runners, across the bridge; and beneath the arch of the castle-gate.

II.

When he was able to take breath again, and to substitute thought for blind instinct, he found himself tramping in a kind of stream of men into what appeared an impenetrably packed crowd. He was going between ropes, however, which formed a lane up which it was possible to move. This lane, after crossing half the court, wheeled suddenly to one side and doubled on itself, conducting the new-comers behind the crowd of privileged persons that had come into the castle overnight, or had been admitted three or four hours ago. These persons were all people of quality; many of them, out of a kind of sympathy for what was to happen, were in black. They stood there in rows, scarcely moving, scarcely speaking, some even bare-headed, filling up now, so far as the priest could see, the entire court, except in that quarter in which he presently found himself

—the furthest corner away from where rose up the tall carved and traceried windows of the banqueting-hall. Yet, though no man spoke above an undertone, a steady low murmur filled the court from side to side, like the sound of a waggon rolling over a paved road.

He reached his place at last, actually against the wall of the soldiers' lodgings, and found, presently, that a low row of projecting stones enabled him to raise himself a few inches, and see, at any rate, a little better than his neighbours. He had perceived one thing instantly—namely, that his dream of getting near enough to the Queen to give her absolution before her death was an impossible one. He had known since yesterday that the execution was to take place in the hall, and here was he, within the court certainly, yet as far as possible away from where he most desired to be.

The last two days had gone by in a horror that there is no describing. All the hours of them he had passed at his parlour window, waiting hopelessly for the summons which never came. John Merton had gone to the castle and come back, each time with more desolate news. There was not a possibility, he said, when the news was finally certified, of getting a place in the hall. Three hundred gentlemen had had those places already assigned; four or five hundred more, it was expected, would have space reserved for them in the courtyard. The only possibility was to be early at the gateway, since a limited number of these would probably be admitted an hour or so before the time fixed for the execution.

The priest had seen many sights from his parlour window during those two days.

On Monday he had seen, early in the morning, Mr. Beale ride out with his men to go to my lord Shrewsbury, who was in the neighbourhood, and had seen him return in time for dinner, with a number of strangers, among whom was an ecclesiastic. On enquiry, he found this to be Dr. Fletcher, Dean of Peterborough, who had been appointed to attend Mary both in her lodgings and upon the scaffold. In the afternoon the street was not empty for half an hour. From all sides poured in horsemen; gentlemen riding in with their servants; yeoman and farmers come in from the countryside, that they might say hereafter that they had at least been in Fotheringay when a Queen suffered the death of the axe. So the dark had fallen, yet lights moved about continually, and horses' hoofs never ceased to beat or the voices of men to talk. Until he fell asleep at last in his window-seat, he listened always to these things; watched the lights; prayed softly to himself; clenched his nails into his hands for indignation; and looked again. On the Tuesday morning came the sheriff, to dine at the castle with Sir Amyas—a great figure of a man, dignified and stalwart, riding in the midst of his men. After dinner came the Earl of Kent, and, last of all, my lord Shrewsbury himself—he who had been her Grace's gaoler, until he proved too kind for Elizabeth's taste—now appointed, with peculiar malice, to assist at her execution. He looked pale and dejected as he rode past beneath the window.

Yet all this time the supreme horror had been that the end was not absolutely certain. All in Fotheringay

were as convinced as men could be, who had not seen the warrant, nor heard it read, that Mr. Beale had brought it with him on Sunday night; the priest, above all, from his communications with Mr. Bourgoign, was morally certain that the terror was come at last. . . . It was not until the last night of Mary's life on earth was beginning to close in that John Merton came up to the parlour, white and terrified, to tell him that he had been in his master's room half an hour ago, and that Mr. Melville had come in to them, his face all slobbered with tears, and had told him that he had but just come from her Grace's rooms, and had heard with his own ears the sentence read to her, and her gallant and noble answer. . . . He had bidden him to go straight off to the priest, with a message from Mr. Bourgoign and himself, to the effect that the execution was appointed for eight o'clock next morning; and that he was to be at the gate of the castle not later than three o'clock, if, by good fortune, he might be admitted when the gates were opened at seven.

III.

And now that the priest was in his place, he began again to think over that answer of the Queen. The very words of it, indeed, he did not know for a month or two later, when Mr. Bourgoign wrote to him at length; but this, at least, he knew, that her Grace had said (and no man contradicted her at that time) that she would shed her blood to-morrow with all the happiness in the world, since it was for the cause of the Catholic

and Roman Church that she died. It was not for any plot that she was to die: she professed again, kissing her Bible as she did so, that she was utterly guiltless of any plot against her sister. She died because she was of that Faith in which she had been born, and which Elizabeth had repudiated. As for death, she did not fear it; she had looked for it during all the eighteen years of her imprisonment.

It was at a martyrdom, then, that he was to assist. . . . He had known that, without a doubt, ever since the day that Mary had declared her innocence at Chartley. There had been no possibility of thinking otherwise; and, as he reflected on this, he remembered that he, too, was guilty of the same crime; . . . and he wondered whether he, too, would die as manfully, if the need for it ever came.

Then, in an instant, he was called back, by the sudden crash of horns and drums playing all together. He saw again the ranks of heads before him: the great arched windows of the hall on the other side of the court, the grim dominating keep, and the merciless February morning sky over all.

It was impossible to tell what was going on.

On all sides of him men jostled and murmured aloud. One said, "She is coming down"; another, "It is all over"; another, "They have awakened her." "What is it? what is it?" whispered Robin to the air, watching waves of movement pass over the serried heads before him. The lights were still burning here and there in the windows, and the tall panes of the hall

were all aglow, as if a great fire burned within. Overhead the sky had turned to daylight at last, but they were grey clouds that filled the heavens so far as he could see. Meanwhile, the horns brayed in unison, a rough melody like the notes of bugles, and the drums beat out the time.

Again there was a long pause—in which the lapse of time was incalculable. Time had no meaning here: men waited from incident to incident only—the moving of a line of steel caps, a pause in the music, a head thrust out from a closed window and drawn back again. . . . Again the music broke out, and this time it was an air that they played—a lilting melancholy melody, that the priest recognised, yet could not identify. Men laughed subduedly near him; he saw a face wrinkled with bitter mirth turned back, and he heard what was said. It was “Jumping Joan” that was being played—the march consecrated to the burning of witches. He had heard it long ago, as a boy. . . .

Then the rumour ran through the crowd, and spent itself at last in the corner where the priest stood trembling with wrath and pity.

“She is in the hall.”

It was impossible to know whether this were true, or whether she had not been there half an hour already. The horror was that all might be over, or not yet begun, or in the very act of doing. He had thought that there would be some pause or warning—that a signal would be given, perhaps, that all might bare their heads or pray, at this violent passing of a Queen. But there was none. The heads surged and quieted; murmurs burst out and died again; and all the while the hateful,

insolent melody rose and fell; the horns bellowed; the drums crashed. It sounded like some shocking dance-measure; a riot of desperate spirits moved in it, tramping up and down, as if in one last fling of devilish gaiety. . . .

Then suddenly the heads grew still; a wave of motionlessness passed over them, as if some strange sympathy were communicated from within those tall windows. The moments passed and passed. It was impossible to hear those murmurs, through the blare of the instruments; there was one sound only that could penetrate them; and this, rising from what seemed at first the wailing of a child, grew and grew into the shrill cries of a dog in agony. At the noise once more a roar of low questioning surged up and fell. Simultaneously the music came to an abrupt close; and, as if at a signal, there sounded a great roar of voices, all shouting together within the hall. It rose yet louder, broke out of doors, and was taken up by those outside. The court was now one sea of tossing heads and open mouths shouting—as if in exultation or in anger. Robin fought for his place on the projecting stones, clung to the rough wall, gripped a window-bar and drew himself yet higher.

Then, as he clenched himself tight and stared out again towards the tall windows that shone in bloody flakes of fire from the roaring logs within; a sudden and profound silence fell once more before being shattered again by a thousand roaring throats. . . .

For there, in full view beyond the clear glass stood

a tall, black figure, masked to the mouth, who held in his outstretched hands a wide silver dish, in which lay something white and round and slashed with crimson. . . .

PART IV.

CHAPTER I.

I.

"THERE is no more to be said, then," said Marjorie, and leaned back, with a white, exhausted face. "We can do no more."

It was a little council of Papists that was gathered—a year after the Queen's death at Fotheringay—in Mistress Manners' parlour. Mr. John FitzHerbert was there; he had ridden up an hour before with heavy news from Padley and its messenger. Mistress Alice was there, quiet as ever, yet paler and thinner than in former years (Mistress Babington herself had gone back to her family last year). And, last, Robin himself was there, having himself borne the news from Derby.

He had had an eventful year, yet never yet had he come within reach of the pursuivant. But he had largely effected this by the particular care which he had observed with regard to Matstead, and his silence as to his own identity. Extraordinary care, too, was observed by his friends, who had learned by now to call him

even in private by his alias; and it appeared certain that beyond a dozen or two of discreet persons it was utterly unsuspected that the stately bearded young gentleman named Mr. Robert Alban—the “man of God,” as, like other priests, he was commonly called amongst the Catholics—had any connection whatever with the hawking, hunting and hard-riding lover of Mistress Manners. It was known, indeed, that Mr. Robin had gone abroad years ago to be made priest; but those who thought of him at all, or, at least as returned, believed him sent to some other part of England, for the sake of his father, and it was partly because of the very fact that his father was so hot against the Papists that it had been thought safe at Rheims to send him to Derbyshire, since this would be the very last place in which he would be looked for.

He had avoided Matstead then—riding through it once only by night, with strange emotions—and had spent most of his time in the south of Derbyshire, crossing more than once over into Stafford and Chester, and returning to Padley or to Booth’s Edge once in every three or four months. He had learned a hundred lessons in these wanderings of his.

The news that he had now brought with him was of the worst. He had heard from Catholics in Derby that Mr. Simpson, returned again after his banishment, recaptured a month or two ago, and awaiting trial at the Lent Assizes, was beginning to falter. Death was a certainty for him this time, and it appeared that he had seemed very timorous before two or three friends who had visited him in gaol, declaring that he had done all that a man could do, that he was being worn out by

suffering and privation, and that there was some limit, after all, to what God Almighty should demand.

Marjorie had cried out just now, driven beyond herself at the thought of what all this must mean for the Catholics of the countryside, many of whom already had fallen away during the last year or two beneath the pitiless storm of fines, suspicions and threats—had cried out that it was impossible that such a man as Mr. Simpson could fall; that the ruin it would bring upon the Faith must be proportionate to the influence he already had won throughout the country by his years of labour; entreating, finally, when the trustworthiness of the report had been forced upon her at last, that she herself might be allowed to go and see him and speak with him in prison.

This, however, had been strongly refused by her counsellors just now. They had declared that her help was invaluable; that the amazing manner in which her little retired house on the moors had so far evaded grave suspicion rendered it one of the greatest safeguards that the hunted Catholics possessed; that the work she was doing by her organisation of messengers and letters must not be risked, even for the sake of a matter like this. . . .

She had given in at last. But her spirit seemed broken altogether.

II.

"There is one more matter," said Robin presently, uncrossing one splashed leg from over the other. "I had not thought to speak of it; but I think it best now to do so. It concerns myself a little; and, therefore, if I may flatter myself, it concerns my friends, too."

He smiled genially upon the company; for if there was one thing more than another he had learned in his travels, it was that the tragic air never yet helped any man.

Marjorie lifted her eyes a moment.

"Mistress Manners," he said, "you remember my speaking to you after Fotheringay, of a fellow of my lord Shrewsbury's who honoured me with his suspicions?"

She nodded.

"I have never set eyes on him from that day to this—to this," he added. "And this morning in the open street in Derby whom should I meet with but young Merton and his father. (Her Grace's servants have suffered horribly since last year. But that is a tale for another day.) Well, I stopped to speak with these two. The young man hath left Mr. Melville's service awhile back, it seems; and is to try his fortune in France. Well; we were speaking of this and that, when who should come by but a party of men and my lord Shrewsbury in the midst, riding with Mr. Roger Columbello; and immediately behind them my friend of the 'New Inn' of Fotheringay. It was all the ill-fortune in the world that it should be at such moment; if he had seen me alone

he would have thought no more of me; but seeing me with young Jack Merton, he looked from one to the other. And I will stake my hat he knew me again."

Marjorie was looking full at him now.

"What was my lord Shrewsbury doing in Derby with Mr. Columbell?" mused Mr. John, biting his moustaches.

"It was the very question I put to myself," said Robin. "And I took the liberty of seeing where they went. They went to Mr. Columbell's own house, and indoors of it. The serving-men held the horses at the door. I watched them awhile from Mr. Biddell's window; but they were still there when I came away at last."

"What hour was that?" asked the old man.

"That would be after dinner-time. I had dined early; and I met them afterwards. My lord would surely be dining with Mr. Columbell. But that is no answer to my question. It rather pierces down to the further point, Why was my lord Shrewsbury dining with Mr. Columbell? Shrewsbury is a great lord; Mr. Columbell is a little magistrate. My lord hath his own house in the country, and there be good inns in Derby."

He stopped short.

"What is the matter, Mistress Manners?" he asked.

"What of yourself?" she said sharply; "you were speaking of yourself."

Robin laughed.

"I had forgotten myself for once! . . . Why, yes; I intended to ask the company what I had best do. What with this news of Mr. Simpson, and the report Mistress Manners gives us of the country-folk, a poor priest must look to himself in these days; and not for his own sake

only. Now, my lord Shrewsbury's man knows nothing of me except that I had strange business at Fotheringay a year ago. But to have had strange business at Fotheringay a year ago is a suspicious circumstance; and——"

"Mr. Alban," broke in the old man, "you had best do nothing at all. You were not followed from Derby; you are as safe in Padley or here as you could be anywhere in England. All that you had best do is to remain here a week or two and not go down to Derby again for the present. I think that showing of yourself openly in towns hath its dangers as well as its safeguards."

Mr. John glanced round. Marjorie bowed her head in assent.

"I will do precisely as you say," said Robin easily. "And now for the news of her Grace's servants."

He had already again and again told the tale of Fotheringay so far as he had seen it in this very parlour. At first he had hardly found himself able to speak of it without tears. He had described the scene he had looked upon when, in the rush that had been made towards the hall after Mary's head had been shown at the window, he had found a place, and had been forced along, partly with his will and partly against it, right through the great doors into the very place where the Queen had suffered; and he had told the story so well that his listeners had seemed to see it for themselves—the great hall hung with black throughout; the raised scaffold at the further end beside the fire that blazed on the wide hearth; the Queen's servants being led away half-swooning as he came in; the dress of velvet, the

straw and the bloody sawdust, the beads and all the other pitiful relics being heaped upon the fire as he stood there in the struggling mob; and, above all, the fallen body, in its short skirt and bodice lying there where it fell beside the low, black block. He had told all this as he had seen it for himself, until the sheriff's men drove them all forth again into the court; and he had told, too, of all that he had heard afterwards, that had happened until my lord Shrewsbury's son had ridden out at a gallop to take the news to court, and the imprisoned watchers had been allowed to leave the Castle; how the little dog, that he had heard wailing, had leapt out as the head fell at the third stroke, so that he was all bathed in his mistress' blood—one of the very spaniels, no doubt, which he himself had seen at Chartley; how the dog was taken away and washed and given afterwards into Mr. Melville's charge; how the body and the head had been taken upstairs, had been roughly embalmed, and laid in a locked chamber; how her servants had been found peeping through the keyhole and praying aloud there, till Sir Amyas had had the hole stopped up. He had told them, too, of the events that followed; of the mass M. de Préau had been permitted to say in the Queen's oratory on the morning after; and of the oath that he had been forced to take that he would not say it again; of the destruction of the oratory and the confiscation of the altar furniture and vestments.

All this he had told, little by little; and of the Queen's noble bearing upon the scaffold, her utter fearlessness, her protestations that she died for her religion and for that only, and of the pesterings of Dr. Fletcher, Dean of Peterborough, who had at last given over in

despair, and prayed instead. The rest they knew for themselves—of the miserable falseness of Elizabeth who feigned, after having signed the warrant and sent it, that it was Mr. Davison's fault for doing as she told him; and of her accusations (accusations that deceived no man) against those who had served her; of the fires made in the streets of all great towns as a mark of official rejoicing over Mary's death; and of the pitiful restitution made by the great funeral in Peterborough, six months after, and the royal escutcheons and the tapers and the hearse, and all the rest of the lying pretences by which the murderess sought to absolve her victim from the crime of being murdered. Well; it was all over. . . .

And now he told them of what he had heard to-day from young Merton in Derby; of how Nau, Mary's French secretary—the one who had served her for eleven years and had been loaded by her with kindness—had been rewarded also by Elizabeth, and that the nature of his services was unmistakable; while all the rest of them, who had refused utterly to take any part in the insolent mourning at Peterborough, either in the Cathedral or at the banquet, had fallen under her Grace's displeasure, so that some of them, even now, were scarcely out of ward, Mr. Bourgoign alone excepted, since he was allowed to take the news of the death to their Graces of France, and had, most wisely, remained there ever since.

So the party sat round the fire in the same little parlour where they had sat so often before, with the

lutes and wreaths embroidered on the hangings and Icarus in the chariot of the sun; and Robin, after telling his tale, answered question after question, till silence fell, and all sat motionless, thinking of the woman who, while dead, yet spoke.

Then Mr. John stood up, clapped the priest on the back, and said that they two must be off to Padley for the night.

III.

They had all risen to their feet when a knocking came on the door, and Janet looked in. She seemed a little perturbed.

"If you please, sir," she said to Mr. John, "one of your men is come up from Padley; and wishes to speak to you alone."

Mr. John gave a quick glance at the others.

"If you will allow me," he said, "I will go down and speak with him in the hall."

The rest sat down again. It was the kind of interruption that might be wholly innocent; yet, coming when it did, it affected them a little. There seemed to be nothing but bad news everywhere.

The minutes passed, yet no one returned. Once Marjorie went to the door and listened, but there was only the faint wail of the winter wind up the stairs to be heard. Then, five minutes later, there were steps, and Mr. John came in. His face looked a little stern, but he smiled with his mouth.

"We poor Papists are in trouble again," he said. "Mistress Manners, you must let us stay here all night, if you will; and we will be off early in the morning. There is a party coming to us from Derby—to-morrow or next day: it is not known which."

"Why, yes! And what party?" said Marjorie, quietly enough, though she must have guessed its character. The smile left his mouth.

"It is my son that is behind it," he said. "I had wondered we had not had news of him! There is to be a general search for seminarists in the High Peak" (he glanced at Robin), "by order of my lord Shrewsbury. Your namesake, mistress, Mr. John Manners, and our friend Mr. Columbello, are commissioned to search; and Mr. Fenton and myself are singled out to be apprehended immediately. Thomas knows that I am at Padley, and that Mr. Eyre will come in there for Candlemas, the day after to-morrow; in that I recognise my son's knowledge. Well, I will dispatch my man who brought the news to Mr. Eyre to bid him to avoid the place; and we two, Mr. Alban and myself, will make our way across the border into Stafford."

"There are none others coming to Padley to-morrow?" asked Marjorie.

"None that I know of. They will come in sometimes without warning; but I cannot help that. Mr. Fenton will be at Tansley: he told me so."

"How did the news come?" asked Robin.

"It seems that the preacher Walton, in Derby, hath been warned that we shall be delivered to him two days hence. It was his servant that told one of mine. I

fear he will be a-preparing his sermons to us, all for nothing."

He smiled bitterly again. Robin could see the misery in this man's heart at the thought that it was his own son who had contrived this. Mr. Thomas had been quiet for many months, no doubt in order to strike the more surely in his new function as "sworn man" of her Grace. Yet he would seem to have failed.

"We shall not get our candles then, this year either," smiled Mr. Thomas. "Lanterns are all that we shall have."

There was not much time to be lost. Luggage had to be packed, since it would not be safe for the three to return until at least two or three weeks had passed; and Marjorie, besides, had to prepare a list of places and names that must be dealt with on their way—places where word must be left that the hunt was up again, and names of particular persons that were to be warned. Mr. Garlick and Mr. Ludlam were in the county, and these must be specially informed, since they were known, and Mr. Garlick in particular had already suffered banishment and returned again, so that there would be no hope for him if he were once more captured.

The four sat late that night; and Robin wondered more than ever, not only at the self-command of the girl, but at her extraordinary knowledge of Catholic affairs in the county. She calculated, almost without mistake, as was afterwards shown, not only which priests were in Derbyshire, but within a very few miles of where they would be and at what time: she showed, half-smiling, a

kind of chart which she had drawn up, of the movements of the persons concerned, explaining the plan by which each priest (if he desired) might go on his own circuit where he would be most needed. She lamented, however, the fewness of the priests, and attributed to this the growing laxity of many families—living, it might be, in upland farms or in inaccessible places, where they could but very seldom have the visits of the priest and the strength of the sacraments.

Before midnight, therefore, the two travellers had complete directions for their journey, as well as papers to help their memories, as to where the news was to be left. And at last Mr. John stood up and stretched himself.

"We must go to bed," he said. "We must be booted by five."

Marjorie nodded to Alice, who stood up, saying she would show him where his bed had been prepared.

Robin lingered for a moment to finish his last notes.

"Mr. Alban," said Marjorie suddenly, without lifting her eyes, from the paper on which she wrote.

"Yes?"

"You will take care to-morrow, will you not?" she said. "Mr. John is a little hot-headed. You must keep him to his route?"

"I will do my best," said Robin, smiling.

She lifted her clear eyes to his without tremor or shame.

"My heart would be broken altogether if aught happened to you. I look to you as our Lord's chief soldier in this county."

"But——"

"That is so," she said. "I do not know any man who has been made perfect in so short a time. You hold us all in your hands."

CHAPTER II.

I.

IT was in Mr. Bassett's house at Langley that the news of the attack on Padley reached the two travellers a month later, and it bore news in it that they little expected.

For it seemed that, entirely unexpectedly, there had arrived at Padley the following night, no less than three of the FitzHerbert family, Mr. Anthony the seventh son, with two of his sisters, as well as Thomas FitzHerbert's wife, who rode with them, whether as a spy or not was never known. Further, Mr. Fenton himself, hearing of their coming, had ridden up from Tansley, and missed the messenger that Marjorie had sent out. They had not arrived till late, missing again, by a series of mischances, the scouts Marjorie had posted; and, on discovering their danger, had further discovered the house to be already watched. They judged it better, therefore, as Marjorie said in her letter, to feign unconsciousness of any charge against them, since there was no priest in the house who could incriminate them.

All this the travellers learned for the first time at Langley.

They had gone through into Staffordshire, as had

been arranged, and there had moved about from house to house of Catholic friends without any trouble. It was when at last they thought it safe to be moving homewards, and had arrived at Langley, that they found Marjorie's letter awaiting them. It was addressed to Mr. John FitzHerbert and was brought by Robin's old servant, Dick Sampson.

"The assault was made," wrote Marjorie, "according to the arrangement. Mr. Columbello himself came with a score of men and surrounded the house very early, having set watchers all in place the evening before: they had made certain they should catch the master and at least a priest or two. But I have very heavy news, for all that; for there had come to the house after dark Mr. Anthony FitzHerbert, with two of his sisters, Mrs. Thomas FitzHerbert and Mr. Fenton himself, and they have carried the two gentlemen to the Derby gaol. I have had no word from Mr. Anthony, but I hear that he said that he was glad that his father was not taken, and that his own taking he puts down to his brother's account, as yourself, sir, also did. The men did no great harm in Padley beyond breaking a panel or two: they were too careful, I suppose, of what they think will be Mr. Topcliffe's property some day! And they found none of the hiding-holes, which is good news. The rest of the party they let go free again for the present.

"I have another piece of bad news, too—which is no more than what we had looked for: that Mr. Simpson at the Assizes was condemned to death, but has promised to go to church, so that his life is spared if

he will do so. He is still in the gaol, however, where I pray God that Mr. Anthony may meet with him and bring him to a better mind; so that he hath not yet denied our Lord, even though he hath promised to do so.

"May God comfort and console you, Mr. FitzHerbert, for this news of Mr. Anthony that I send."

The letter ended with messages to the party, with instructions for their way of return if they should come within the next week; and with the explanation, given above, of the series of misfortunes by which any came to be at Padley that night, and how it was that they did not attempt to break out again.

The capture of Mr. Anthony was, indeed, one more blow to his father; but Robin was astonished how cheerfully he bore it; and said as much when they two were alone in the garden.

The grey old man smiled, while his eyelids twitched a little.

"They say that when a man is whipped he feels no more after awhile. The former blows prepare him and dull his nerves for the later, which, I take it, is part of God's mercy. Well, Mr. Alban, my father hath been in prison a great while now; my son Thomas is a traitor, and a sworn man of her Grace; I myself have been fined and persecuted till I have had to sell land to pay the fines with. I have seen family after family fall from their faith and deny it. So I take it that I feel the joy that I have a son who is ready to suffer for it, more

than the pain I have in thinking on his sufferings. The one may perhaps atone for the sins of the other, and yet help him to repentance."

Life here at Langley was more encouraging than the furtive existence necessary in the north of Derbyshire.

Mr. Bassett had a confident way with him that was like wine to fainting hearts, and he had every reason to be confident; since up to the present, beyond being forced to pay the usual fines for recusancy, he had scarcely been troubled at all; and lived in considerable prosperity, having even been sheriff of Stafford in virtue of his other estates at Blore. His house at Langley was a great one, standing in a park, and showing no signs of poverty; his servants were largely Catholic; he entertained priests and refugees of all kinds freely, although discreetly; and he laughed at the notion that the persecution could be of long endurance.

The very first night the travellers had come he had spoken with considerable freedom after supper.

"Look more hearty!" he cried. "The Spanish fleet will be here before summer to relieve us of all troubles, as of all heretics, too. Her Grace will have to turn her coat once more, I think, when that comes to pass."

Mr. John glanced at him doubtfully.

"First," he said, "no man knows whether it will come. And, next, I for one am not sure if I even wish for it."

Mr. Bassett laughed loudly.

"You will dance for joy!" he said. "And why do you not know whether you wish it to come?"

"I have no taste to be a Spanish subject."

"Why, nor have I! But the King of Spain will but sail away again when he hath made terms against the privateers, whether they be those that ply on the high seas against men's bodies, or here in England against their souls. There will be no subjection of England beyond that."

Mr. John was silent.

"Why, I heard from Sir Thomas but a week ago, to ask for a little money to pay his fines with. He said that repayment should follow so soon as the fleet should come. Those were his very words."

"You sent the money, then?"

"Why, yes; I made shift that a servant should throw down a bag with ten pounds in it, into a bush, and that Brittlebank—your brother's man—should see him do it! And lo! when we looked again, the bag was gone!"

He laughed again with open mouth. Certainly he was an inspiriting man with a loud bark of his own; but Robin imagined that he would not bite too cruelly for all that. But he saw another side of him presently.

"What was that matter of Mr. Sutton, the priest who was executed in Stafford last year?" asked Mr. John suddenly.

The face of the other changed as abruptly. His eyes became pin-points under his grey eyebrows and his mouth tightened.

"What of him?" he said.

"It was reported that you might have stayed the execution, and would not. I did not believe a word of it."

"It is true," said Mr. Bassett sharply—"at least a portion of it."

"True?"

"Listen," cried the other suddenly, "and tell me what you would have done. Mr. Sutton was taken, and was banished, and came back again, as any worthy priest would do. Then he was taken again, and condemned. I did my utmost to save him, but I could not. Then, as I would never have any part in the death of a priest for his religion, another was appointed to carry the execution through. Three days before news was brought to me by a private hand that Mr. Sutton had promised to give the names of priests whom he knew, and of houses where he had said mass, and I know not what else; and it was said to me that I might on this account stay the execution until he had told all that he could. Now I knew that I could not save his life altogether; that was forfeited and there could be no forgiveness. All that I might do was to respite him for a little—and for what? That he might damn his own soul eternally and bring a great number of good men into trouble and peril of death for themselves. I sent the messenger away again, and said that I would listen to no such tales. And Mr. Sutton died like a good priest three days after, repenting, I doubt not, bitterly, of the weakness into which he had fallen. Now, sir, what would you have done in my place?"

He wagged his face fiercely from side to side.

Mr. John put his hand over his eyes and nodded without speaking. Robin sat silent: it was not only for priests, it seemed, that life presented a tangle.

II.

The evening before the two left for the north again, Mr. Bassett took them both into his own study. It was a little room opening out of his bedroom, and was more full of books than Robin had ever seen, except in the library at Rheims, in any room in the world. A shelf ran round the room, high on the wall, and was piled with manuscripts to the ceiling. Beneath, the bookshelves that ran nearly round the room were packed with volumes, and a number more lay on the table and even in the corners.

"This is my own privy chamber," said Mr. Bassett to the priest. "My other friends have seen it many a time, but I thought I would show it to your Reverence, too."

Robin looked round him in wonder: he had no idea that his host was a man of such learning.

"All the books are ranged in their proper places," went on the other. "I could put my finger on any of them blindfold. But this is the shelf I wished you to see."

He took him to one that was behind the door, holding up the candle that he might see. The shelf had a box or two on it, besides books, and these he opened and set on the table. Robin looked in, as he was told, but could understand nothing that he saw: in one was a round ball of crystal on a little gold stand, wrapped round in velvet; in another some kind of a machine with wheels; in a third, some dried substances, as of herbs,

tied together with silk. He inspected them gravely, but was not invited to touch them. Then his host touched him on the breast with one finger, and recoiled, smiling.

"This is my magic," he said. "John here does not like it; neither did poor Mr. Fenton when he was here; but I hold there is no harm in such things if one does but observe caution."

"What do you do with them, sir?" enquired the priest curiously, for he was not sure whether the man was serious.

"Well, sir, I hold that God has written His will in the stars, and in the burning of herbs, and in the shining of the sun, and such things. There is no black magic here. But, just as we read in the sky at morning, if it be red or yellow, whether it will be foul or fair, so I hold that God has written other secrets of His in other things; and that by observing them and judging rightly we may guess what He has in store. I knew that a prince was to die last year before ever it happened. I knew that a fleet of ships will come to England this year, before ever an anchor is weighed. And I would have you notice that here are Mr. FitzHerbert and your Reverence, too, fleeing for your lives; and here sit I safe at home; and all, as I hold, because I have been able to observe by my magic what is to come to pass."

"But that strikes at the doctrine of free-will," cried the priest.

"No, sir; I think it does not. God's foreknowledge doth not hinder the use of our free-will (which is a mystery, no doubt, yet none the less true). Then why should God's foreknowledge any more hinder our free-will, when he chooses to communicate it to us?"

Robin was silent. He knew little or nothing of these things, except from his theological reading. Yet he felt uneasy. The other said nothing.

"And the stars, too?" he asked.

"I hold," said Mr. Bassett, "that the stars have certain influences and powers upon those that are born under their signs. I do not hold that we are so ruled by these that we have no action of our own, any more than we are compelled to be wet through by rain or scorched by the sun: we may always come into a house or shelter beneath a tree, and thus escape them. So, too, I hold, with the stars. There is an old saying, sir: 'The fool is ruled by his stars; the wise man rules them.' That is, in a nut-shell, my faith in the matter. I have told Mr. Fenton's fortune here, and Mr. FitzHerbert's, only they will never listen to me."

Robin looked round the room. It was dark outside long ago; they had supped at sunset, and sat for half an hour over their banquet of sweetmeats and wine before coming upstairs. And the room, too, was as dark as night, except where far off in the west, beyond the tall trees of the park, a few red streaks lingered. He felt oppressed and miserable. The place seemed to him sinister. He hated these fumbleings at locks that were surely meant to remain closed. Yet he did not know what to say. Mr. John had wandered off to one of the windows and was humming uneasily to himself.

Then, suddenly, an intense curiosity overcame him.

His life was a strange and perilous one; he carried it in his hand every day. In the morning he could not be sure but that he would be fleeing before evening. As he fell asleep, he could not be sure that he would

not be awakened to a new dream. He had long ago conquered those moods of terror which, in spite of his courage, had come down on him sometimes, in some lonely farm, perhaps, where flight would be impossible—or, in what was far more dangerous, in some crowded inn where every movement was known—these had passed, he thought, never to come back.

But in that little book-lined room, with these curious things in boxes on the table, and his merry host peering at him gravely, and the still evening outside; with the knowledge that to-morrow he was to ride back to his own country, whence he had fled for fear of his life, six weeks ago; leaving the security of this ex-sheriff's house for the perils of the Peak and all that suspected region from which even now, probably, the pursuit had not altogether died away—here a sudden intense desire to know what the future might hold overcame him.

"Tell me, sir," he said. "You have told Mr. Fitz-Herbert's fortune, you say, as well as others. Have you told mine since I have been here?"

There was a moment's silence. Mr. John was silent, with his back turned. Robin looked up at his host, wondering why he did not answer. Then Mr. Bassett took up the candle.

"Come," he said; "we have been here long enough."

CHAPTER III.

I.

"THERE will be a company of us to-night," said Mr. John to the two priests, as he helped them to dismount. "Mr. Alban has sent his man forward from Derby to say that he will be here before night."

"Mr. Ludlam and I are together for once," said Mr. Garlick. "We must separate again to-morrow; he is for the north again, he tells me. There has been no more trouble?"

"Not a word of it. They were beaten last time and will not try again, I think, for the present. You heard of the attempt at Candlemas, then?"

It had been a quiet time enough ever since Lent, throughout the whole county; and it seemed as if the heat of the assault had cooled for want of success. Plainly a great deal had been staked upon the attack on Padley, which, for its remoteness from towns, was known to be a meeting-place where priests could always find harbourage. And, indeed, it was time that the Catholics should have a little breathing-space. Things had been very bad with them—the arrest of Mr. Simp-

son, and, still more, his weakness (though he had not as yet actually fulfilled his promise of going to church, and was still detained in gaol); the growing lukewarmness of families that seldom saw a priest; the blows struck at the FitzHerbert family; and, above all, the defection of Mr. Thomas—all these things had brought the hearts of the faithful very low. Mr. John himself had had an untroubled time since his return a little before Easter; but he had taken the precaution not to remain too long at Padley at one time; he had visited his other estates at Swynnerton and elsewhere, and had even been back again at Langley. But there had been no hint of any pursuit. Padley had remained untouched: the men went about their farm business; the housekeeper peered from her windows, without a glimpse of armed men such as had terrified the household on Candlemas day.

It was only last night, indeed, that the master had returned, in time to meet the two priests who had asked for shelter for a day or two. They had stayed here before continually, as well as at Booth's Edge, during their travels, both in the master's absence and when he was at home. There were a couple of rooms kept vacant always for "men of God"; and all priests who came were instructed, of course (in case of necessity), as to the hiding-places that Mr. Owen had contrived a few years before. Never, however, had there been any use made of them.

It was a hot July afternoon when the two priests were met to-day by Mr. John outside the arched gate that ran between the hall and the buttery. They had

already dined at a farm a few miles down the valley, but they were taken round the house at once to the walled garden, where drink and food were set out. Here their dusty boots were pulled off; they laid aside their hats, and were presently at their ease again.

They were plain men, these two; though Mr. Garlick had been educated at Oxford, and, before his going to Rheims, had been schoolmaster at Tideswell. In appearance he was a breezy sunburnt man, with very little of the clerk about him, and devoted to outdoor sports (which was something of a disguise to him since he could talk hawking and riding in mixed company with a real knowledge of the facts). He spoke in a loud voice with a strong Derbyshire accent, which he had never lost and now deliberately used. Mr. Ludlam looked far more of the priest: he was a clean-shaven man, of middle-age, with hair turning to grey on his temples, and with a very pleasant disarming smile; he spoke very little, but listened with an interested and attentive air. Both were, of course, dressed in the usual riding costume of gentlemen, and used good horses.

It was exceedingly good to sit here, with the breeze from over the moors coming down on them, with cool drink before them, and the prospect of a secure day, at any rate, in this stronghold. Their host, too, was contented and serene, and said so, frankly.

"I am more at peace, gentlemen," he said, "than I have been for the past five years. My son is in gaol yet; and I am proud that he should be there, since my eldest son——" (he broke off a moment). "And I think

the worst of the storm is over. Her Grace is busying herself with other matters."

"You mean the Spanish fleet, sir?" said Mr. Garlick.

He nodded.

"It is not that I look for final deliverance from Spain," he said. "I have no wish to be aught but an Englishman, as I said to Mr. Bassett a while ago. But I think the fleet will distract her Grace for awhile; and it may very well mean that we have better treatment hereafter."

"What news is there, sir?"

"I hear that the Londoners buzz continually with false alarms. It was thought that the fleet might arrive on any day; but I understand that the fishing-boats say that nothing has yet been seen. By the end of the month, I daresay, we shall have news."

So they talked pleasantly in the shade till the shadows began to lengthen. They were far enough here from the sea-coast to feel somewhat detached from the excitement that was beginning to seethe in the south. At Plymouth, it was said, all had been in readiness for a month or two past; at Tilbury, my lord Leicester was steadily gathering troops. But here, inland, it was more of an academic question. The little happenings in Derby; the changes of weather in the farms; the deaths of old people from the summer heats—these things were far more vital and significant than the distant thunders of Spain. A beacon or two had been piled on the hills, by order of the authorities, to pass on the news

when it should come; a few lads had disappeared from the countryside to drill in Derby market-place; but except for these things, all was very much as it had been from the beginning. The expected catastrophe meant little more to such folk than the coming of the Judgment Day—certain, but infinitely remote from the grasp of the imagination.

The three were talking of Robin as they came down towards the house for supper, and, as they turned the corner, he himself was at that moment dismounting.

He looked surprisingly cool and well-trimmed, considering his ride up the hot valley. He had taken his journey easily, he said, as he had had a long day yesterday.

"And I made a round to pay a visit to Mistress Manners," he said. "I found her a-bed when I got there; and Mrs. Alice says she will not be at mass tomorrow. She stood too long in the sun yesterday, at the carrying of the hay; it is no more than that."

"Mistress Manners is a marvel to me," said Garlick, as they went towards the house. "Neither wife nor nun. And she rules her house like a man; and she knows if a priest lift his little finger in Derby. She sent me my whole itinerary for this last circuit of mine; and every point fell out as she said."

Robin thought that he had seldom had so pleasant a supper as on that night. The windows of the low

hall where he had dined so often as a boy, were flung wide to catch the scented evening air. The sun was round to the west and threw long, golden rays, that were all lovely light and no heat, slantways on the paved floor and the polished tables and the bright pewter. Down at the lower end sat the servants, brown men, burned by the sun; lean as panthers, scarcely speaking, ravenous after their long day in the hayfields; and up here three companions with whom he was wholly at his ease. The evening was as still as night, except for the faint peaceful country sounds that came up from the valley below—the song of a lad riding home; the barking of a dog; the bleat of sheep—all minute and delicate, as unperceived, yet as effective, as a rich fabric on which a design is woven. It seemed to him as he listened to the talk—the brisk, shrewd remarks of Mr. Garlick; the courteous and rather melancholy answers of his host; as he watched the second priest's eyes looking gently and pleasantly about him; as he ate the plain, good food and drank the country drink, that, in spite of all, his lot was cast in very sweet places. There was not a hint here of disturbance, or of men's passions, or of ugly strife: there was no clatter, as in the streets of Derby, or pressure of humanity, or wearying politics of the market-place. He found himself in one of those moods that visit all men sometimes, when the world appears, after all, a homely and a genial place; when the simplest things are the best; when no excitement or ambition or furious zeal can compare with the gentle happiness of a tired body that is in the act of refreshment, or of a driven mind that is finding its relaxation. At least, he said to himself, he would enjoy this night

and the next day and the night after, with all his heart.

The four found themselves so much at ease here, that the dessert was brought in to them where they sat; and it was then that the first unhappy word was spoken.

"Mr. Simpson!" said Garlick suddenly. "Is there any more news of him?"

Mr. John shook his head.

"He hath not yet been to church, thank God!" he said. "So much I know for certain. But he hath promised to go."

"Why is he not yet gone? He promised a great while ago."

"I hear he hath been sick. Derby gaol is a pestiferous place. They are waiting, I suppose, till he is well enough to go publicly, that all the world may be advertised of it!"

Mr. Garlick gave a bursting sigh.

"I cannot understand it at all," he said. "There has never been so zealous a priest. I have ridden with him again and again before I was a priest. He was always quiet; but I took him to be one of those stout-hearted souls that need never brag. Why, it was here that we heard him tell of Mr. Nelson's death!"

Mr. John threw out his hands.

"These prisons are devilish," he said; "they wear a man out as the rack can never do. Why, see my son!" he cried. "Oh! I can speak of him if I am but moved enough! It was that same Derby gaol that wore him

out too! It is the darkness, and the ill food, and the stench and the misery. A man's heart fails him there, who could face a thousand deaths in the sunlight. Man after man hath fallen there—both in Derby, and in London and in all the prisons. It is their heart that goes—all the courage runs from them like water, with their health. If it were the rack and the rope only, England would be Catholic yet, I think."

The old man's face blazed with indignation; it was not often that he so spoke out his mind. It was very easy to see that he had thought continually of his son's fall.

"Mistress Manners hath told me the very same thing," said Robin. "She visited Mr. Thomas in gaol once at least. She said that her heart failed her altogether there."

Mr. Ludlam smiled.

"I suppose it is so," he said gently, "since you say so. But I think it would not be so with me. The rack and the rope, rather, are what would shake me to the roots, unless God His Grace prevailed more than it ever yet hath, with me."

He smiled again.

Robin shook his head sharply.

"As for me——!" he said grimly, with tight lips.

It was a lovely night of stars as the four stepped out of the archway before going upstairs to the parlour. Behind them stood the square and solid house, resembling a very fortress. The lights that had been brought in still shone through the windows, and a

hundred night insects leapt and poised in the brightness.

And before them lay the deep valley—silent now except for the trickle of the stream; dark (since the moon was not yet risen), except for one light that burned far away in some farmhouse on the other side; and this light went out, like a closing eye, even as they looked. But overhead, where God dwelt, all heaven was alive. The huge arch resting, as it appeared, on the monstrous bases of the moors and hills standing round this place, like the mountains about Jerusalem, was one shimmering vault of glory, as if it was there that the home of life had its place, and this earth beneath but a bedroom for mortals, or for those that were too weary to aspire or climb. The suggestion was enormously powerful. Here was this mortal earth that needed rest so cruelly—that must have darkness to refresh its tired eyes, coolness to recuperate its passion, and silence, if ever its ears were to hear again. But there was radiance unending. All day a dome of rigid blue; all night a span of glittering lights—the very home of a glory that knows no waste and that therefore needs no reviving: it was to that only, therefore, that a life must be chained which would not falter or fail in the unending tides and changes of the world. . . .

A soft breeze sprang up among the tops of the chestnuts; and the sound was as of the going of a great company that whispered for silence.

II.

It was within an hour of dawn that the first mass was said next morning by Mr. Robert Alban.

The chapel was decked out as they seldom dared to deck it in those days; but the failure of the last attempt on this place, and the peace that had followed, made them bold.

The carved chest of newly-cut oak was in its place, with a rich carpet of silk spread on its face; and, on the top, the three linen cloths as prescribed by the Ritual. Two silver candlesticks, that stood usually on the high shelf over the hall-fire, and a silver crucifix of Flemish work, taken from the hiding-place, were in a row on the back, with red and white flowers between. Beneath the linen cloths a tiny flat elevation showed where the altar-stone lay. The rest of the chapel, in its usual hangings, had only sweet herbs on the floor; with two or three long seats carried up from the hall below. An extraordinary sweetness and peace seemed in the place both to the senses and the soul of the young priest as he went up to the altar to vest. Confessions had been heard last night; and, as he turned, in the absolute stillness of the morning, and saw, beneath those carved angels that still to-day lean from the beams of the roof, the whole little space already filled with farm-lads, many of whom were to approach the altar presently, and the grey head of their master kneeling on the floor to answer the mass, it appeared to him as if the promise of last night were reversed, and that it

was, after all, earth rather than heaven that proclaimed the peace and the glory of God. . . .

Robin served the second mass himself, said by Mr. Garlick, and made his thanksgiving as well as he could meanwhile; but he found what appeared to him at the time many distractions, in watching the tanned face and hands of the man who was so utterly a countryman for nine-tenths of his life, and so utterly a priest for the rest. His very sturdiness and breeziness made his reverence the more evident and pathetic: he read the mass rapidly, in a low voice, harshened by shouting in the open air over his sports, made his gestures abruptly, and yet did the whole with an extraordinary attention. After the communion, when he turned for the wine and water, his face, as so often with rude folk in a great emotion, browned as it was with wind and sun, seemed lighted from within; he seemed etherealised, yet with his virility all alive in him. A phrase, wholly inapplicable in its first sense, came irresistibly to the younger priest's mind as he waited on him. "When the strong man, armed, keepeth his house, his goods are in peace."

Robin heard the third mass, said by Mr. Ludlam, from a corner near the door; and this one, too, was a fresh experience. The former priest had resembled a strong man subdued by grace; the second, a weak man ennobled by it. Mr. Ludlam was a delicate soul, smiling often, as has been said, and speaking little—"a mild man," said the country-folk. Yet, at the altar there was no weakness in him; he was as a keen, sharp blade, fitted as a heavy knife cannot be, for fine and peculiar

work. His father had been a yeoman, as had the other's; yet there must have been some unusual strain of blood in him, so deft and gentle he was—more at his ease here at God's Table than at the table of any man. . . . So he, too, finished his mass, and began to unvest. . . .

Then, with a noise as brutal as a blasphemy, there came a thunder of footsteps on the stairs; and a man burst into the room, with glaring eyes and rough gestures.

"There is a company of men coming up from the valley," he cried; "and another over the moor. . . . And it is my lord Shrewsbury's livery."

III.

In an instant all was in confusion; and the peace had fled. Mr. John was gone; and his voice could be heard on the open stairs outside speaking rapidly in sharp, low whispers to the men gathered beneath; and, meanwhile, three or four servants, two men and a couple of maids, previously drilled in their duties, were at the altar, on which Mr. Ludlam had but that moment laid down his amice. The three priests stood together waiting, fearing to hinder or to add to the bustle. A low wailing rose from outside the door; and Robin looked from it to see if there were anything he could do. But it was only a little country servant crouching on the tiny landing that united the two sets of stairs from the court, with her apron over her head: she must have been in the partitioned west end of the chapel to hear

the mass. He said a word to her; and the next instant was pushed aside, as a man tore by bearing a great bundle of stuffs—vestments and the altar cloths. When he turned again, the chapel was become a common room once more: the chest stood bare, with a great bowl of flowers on it; the candlesticks were gone; and the maid was sweeping up the herbs.

"Come, gentlemen," said a sharp voice at the door, "there is no time to lose."

He went out with the two others behind, and followed Mr. John downstairs. Already the party of servants was dispersed to their stations; two or three to keep the doors, no doubt, and the rest back to kitchen work and the like, to give the impression that all was as usual.

The four went straight down into the hall, to find it empty, except for one man who stood by the fireplace. But a surprising change had taken place here. Instead of the solemn panelling, with the carved shield that covered the wall over the hearth, there was a great doorway opened, through which showed, not the bricks of the chimney-breast, but a black space large enough to admit a man.

"See here," said Mr. John, "there is room for two here, but no more. There is room for a third in another little chamber upstairs that is nearly joined on to this: but it is not so good. Now, gentlemen——"

"This is the safer of the two?" asked Robin abruptly.

"I think it to be so. Make haste, gentlemen."

Robin wheeled on the others. He said that there was no time to argue in.

"See!" he said. "I have not yet been taken at all. Mr. Garlick hath been taken; and Mr. Ludlam hath had a warning. There is no question that you must be here."

"I utterly refuse——" began Garlick.

Robin went to the door in three strides; and was out of it. He closed the door behind him and ran upstairs. As he reached the head his eye caught a glint of sunlight on some metal far up on the moor beyond the belt of trees. He did not turn his head again; he went straight in and waited.

Presently he heard steps coming up, and Mr. John appeared smiling and out of breath.

"I have them in," he said, "by promising that there was no great difference after all; and that there was no time. Now, sir——" And he went towards the wall at which, long ago, Mr. Owen had worked so hard.

"And yourself, sir?" asked Robin, as once more an innocent piece of panelling moved outwards under Mr. John's hand.

"I'll see to that; but not until you are in——"

"But——"

The old man's face blazed suddenly up.

"Obey me, if you please. I am the master here. I tell you I have a very good place."

There was no more to be said. Robin advanced to the opening, and sat down to slide himself in. It was a little door about two feet square, with a hole beneath it.

"Drop gently, Mr. Alban," whispered the voice in his ear. "The altar vessels are at the bottom, with the crucifix, on some soft stuff. . . . That is it. Slide in and

let yourself slip. There is some food and drink there, too."

Robin did so. The floor of the little chamber was about five feet down, and he could feel woodwork on all three sides of him.

"When the door is closed," said the voice from the daylight, "push a pair of bolts on right and left till they go home. Tap upon the shutter when it is done."

The light vanished, and Robin was aware of a faint smell of smoke. Then he remembered that he had noticed a newly lit fire on the hearth of the hall. . . . He found the bolts, pushed them, and tapped lightly three times. He heard a hand push on the shutter to see that all was secure, and then footsteps go away over the floor on a level with his chin.

Then he remembered that he must be in the same chamber with his two fellow-priests, separated from them by the flooring on which he stood. He rapped gently with his foot twice. Two soft taps came back. Silence followed.

IV.

Time, as once before in his experience, seemed wholly banished from this place. There were moments of reflection when he appeared to himself as having but just entered; there were other moments when he might have been here for an eternity that had no divisions to mark it. He was in complete and utter darkness. There was not a crack anywhere in the woodwork (so perfect had been the young carpenter's handiwork) by which

even a glimmer of light could enter. Awhile ago he had been in the early morning sunlight; now he might be in the grave.

For awhile his emotions and his thoughts raced one another, tumbling in inextricable confusion; and they were all emotions and thoughts of the present: intense little visions of the men closing round the house, cutting off escape from the valley on the one side and from the wild upland country on the other; questions as to where Mr. John would hide himself; minute sensible impressions of the smoky flavour of the air, the unplanned woodwork, the soft stuffs beneath his feet. Then they began to extend themselves wider, all with that rapid unjarring swiftness: he foresaw the bursting in of his stronghold; the footsteps within three inches of his head; the crash as the board was kicked in: then the capture; the ride to Derby, bound on a horse; the gaol; the questioning; the faces of my lord Shrewsbury and the magistrates . . . and the end. . . .

There were moments when the sweat ran down his face; when he bit his lips in agony, and nearly moaned aloud. There were others in which he abandoned himself to Christ crucified; placed himself in Everlasting Hands that were mighty enough to pluck him not only out of this snare, but from the very hands that would hold him so soon; Hands that could lift him from the rack and scaffold and set him a free man among his hills again: yet that had not done so with a score of others whom he knew. He thought of these, and of the girl who had done so much to save them all, who was now saved herself by sickness, a mile or two away, from

these hideous straits. Then he dragged out Mr. Maine's beads and began to recite the "Mysteries." . . .

There broke in suddenly the first exterior sign that the hunters were on them—a muffled hammering far beneath his feet. There were pauses; then voices carried up from the archway nearly beneath through the hollowed walls; then hammering again; but all was heard as through wool.

As the first noise broke out his mind rearranged itself and seemed to have two consciousnesses. In the foreground he followed, intently and eagerly, every movement below; in the background, there still moved before him the pageant of deeper thoughts and more remote—of prayer and wonder and fear and expectation; and from that onwards it continued so with him. Even while he followed the sounds, he understood why my lord Shrewsbury had made this assault so suddenly, after months of peace. . . . He perceived the hand of Thomas FitzHerbert, too, in the precision with which the attack had been made, and the certain information he must have given that priests would be in Padley that morning.

There were noises that he could not interpret—vague tramlings from a direction which he could not tell; voices that shouted; the sound of metal on stone.

He did interpret rightly, however, the sudden tumult as the gate was unbarred at last, and the shrill screaming of a woman as the company poured through into the house; the clamour of voices from beneath as the hall below was filled with men; the battering that began

almost immediately; and, finally, the rush of shod feet up the outside staircases, one of which led straight into the chapel itself. Then, indeed, his heart seemed to spring upwards into his throat, and to beat there, as loud as knocking, so loud that it appeared to him that all the house must hear it.

Yet it was still some minutes before the climax came to him. He was still standing there, listening to voices talking, it seemed, almost in his ears, yet whose words he could not hear; the vibration of feet that shook the solid joist against which he had leaned his head, with closed eyes; the brush of a cloak once, like a whisper, against the very panel that shut him in. He could attend to nothing else; the rest of the drama was as nothing to him: he had his business in hand—to keep away from himself, by the very intentness of his will and determination, the feet that passed so close.

The climax came in a sudden thump of a pike-foot within a yard of his head, so imminent, that for an instant he thought it was at his own panel. There followed a splintering sound of a pike-head in the same place. He understood. They were sounding on the woodwork and piercing all that rang hollow. . . . His turn, then, would come immediately.

Talking voices followed the crash; then silence; then the vibration of feet once more. The strain grew unbearable; his fingers twisted tight in his rosary, lifted themselves once or twice from the floor edge on which they were gripped, to tear back the bolts and declare himself. It seemed to him in those instants a thousand

times better to come out of his own will, rather than to be poked and dragged from his hole like a badger. In the very midst of such imaginings there came a thumping blow within three inches of his face, and then silence. He leaned back desperately to avoid the pike-thrust that must follow, with his eyes screwed tight and his lips mumbling. He waited; . . . and then, as he waited, he drew an irrepressible hissing breath of terror, for beneath the soft padding under his feet he could feel movements; blow follow blow, from the same direction, and last a great clamour of voices all shouting together.

Feet ran across the floor on which his hands were gripped again, and down the stairs. He perceived two things: the chapel was empty again, and the priests below had been found.

v.

He could follow every step of the drama after that, for he appeared to himself now as a mere witness, without personal part in it.

First, there were voices below him, so clear and close that he could distinguish the intonation, and who it was that spoke, though the words were inaudible.

It was Mr. Garlick who first spoke—a sentence of a dozen words, it might be, consenting, no doubt, to come out without being dragged; congratulating, perhaps (as the manner was), the searchers on their success. A murmur of answer came back, and then one sharp, peevish voice by itself. Again Mr. Garlick spoke, and

there followed the shuffling of movements for a long while; and then, so far as the little chamber was concerned, empty silence. But from the hall rose up a steady murmur of talk once more. . . .

Again Robin's heart leaped in him, for there came the rattle of a pike-end immediately below his feet. They were searching the little chamber beneath, from the level of the hall, to see if it were empty. The pike was presently withdrawn.

For a long while the talking went on. So far as the rest of the house was concerned, the hidden man could tell nothing, or whether Mr. John were taken, or whether the search were given up. He could not even fix his mind on the point; he was constructing for himself, furiously and intently, the scene he imagined in the hall below; he thought he saw the two priests barred in behind the high table; my lord Shrewsbury in the one great chair in the midst of the room; Mr. Columbello perhaps, or Mr. John Manners talking in his ear; the men on guard over the priests and beside the door; and another, maybe, standing by the hearth.

He was so intent on this that he thought of little else; though still, on a strange background of another consciousness, moved scenes and ideas such as he had had at the beginning. And he was torn from this contemplation with the suddenness of a blow, by a voice speaking, it seemed, within a foot of his head.

"Well, we have those rats, at any rate."

(He perceived instantly what had happened. The men were back again in the chapel, and he had not heard them come. He supposed that he could hear the

words now, because of the breaking of the panel next to his own.)

"Ralph said he was sure of the other one, too," said a second voice.

. "Which was that one?"

"The fellow that was at Fotheringay."

(Robin clenched his teeth like iron.)

"Well, he is not here."

There was silence.

"I have sounded that side," said the first voice sharply.

"Well, but——"

"I tell you I have sounded it. There is no time to be lost. My lord——"

"Hark!" said the second voice. "There is my lord's man——"

There followed a movement of feet towards the door, as it seemed to the priest.

He could hear the first man grumbling to himself, and beating listlessly on the walls somewhere. Then a voice called something unintelligible from the direction of the stairs; the beating ceased, and footsteps went across the floor again into silence.

VI.

He was dazed and blinded by the light when, after infinite hours, he drew the bolts and slid the panel open.

He had lost all idea of time utterly: he did not know whether he should find that night had come, or that the next day had dawned. He had waited there, period after period; he marked one of them by eating food that had no taste and drinking liquid that stung his throat but did not affect his palate; he had marked another by saying *compline* to himself in a whisper.

During the earlier part of those periods he had followed—he thought with success—the dreadful drama that was acted in the house. Someone had made a formal inspection of all the chambers—a man who said little and moved heavily with something of a limp (he had thought this to be my lord Shrewsbury himself, who suffered from the gout): this man had walked slowly through the chapel and out again.

At a later period he had heard the horses being brought round the house; heard plainly the jingle of the bits and a sneeze or two. This had been followed by long interminable talking, muffled and indistinguishable, that came up to him from some unknown direction. Voices changed curiously in loudness and articulation as the speakers moved about.

At a later period a loud trampling had begun again, plainly from the hall: he had interpreted this to mean

that the prisoners were being removed out of doors; and he had been confirmed in this by hearing immediately afterwards again the stamping of horses and the creaking of leather.

Again there had been a pause, broken suddenly by loud women's wailing. And at last the noise of horses moving off; the noise grew less; a man ran suddenly through the archway and out again, and, little by little, complete silence once more.

Yet he had not dared to move. It was the custom, he knew, sometimes to leave three or four men on guard for a day or two after such an assault, in the hope of starving out any hidden fugitives that might still be left. So he waited again—period after period; he dozed a little for weariness, propped against the narrow walls of his hiding-hole; woke; felt again for food and found he had eaten it all . . . dozed again.

Then he had started up suddenly, for without any further warning there had come a tiny indeterminate tapping against his panel. He held his breath and listened. It came again. Then fearlessly he drew back the bolts, slid the panel open and shut his eyes, dazzled by the light.

He crawled out at last, spent and dusty. There was looking at him only the little red-eyed maid whom he had tried to comfort at some far-off hour in his life. Her face was all contorted with weeping, and she had a great smear of dust across it.

"What time is it?" he said.

"It . . . it is after two o'clock," she whispered.

"They have all gone?"

She nodded, speechless.

"Whom have they taken?"

"Mr. FitzHerbert . . . the priests . . . the servants."

"Mr. FitzHerbert? They found him, then?"

She stared at him with the dull incapacity to understand why he did not know all that she had seen.

"Where did they find him?" he repeated sharply.

"The master . . . he opened the door to them himself."

Her face writhed itself again into grotesque lines, and she broke out into shrill wailing and weeping.

CHAPTER IV.

I.

MARJORIE was still in bed when the news was brought her by her friend. She did not move or speak when Mistress Alice said shortly that Mr. FitzHerbert had been taken with ten of his servants and two priests.

"You understand, my dear. . . . They have ridden away to Derby, all of them together. But they may come back here suddenly."

Marjorie nodded.

"Mr. Garlick and Mr. Ludlam were in the chimney hole of the hall," whispered Mistress Alice, glancing fearfully behind her.

Marjorie lay back again on her pillows.

"And what of Mr. Alban?" she asked.

"Mr. Alban was upstairs. They missed him. He is coming here after dark, the maid says."

An hour after supper-time the priest came quietly upstairs to the parlour. He showed no signs of his experience, except perhaps by a certain brightness in his eyes and an extreme self-repression of manner. Marjorie

was up to meet him; and had in her hands a paper. She hardly spoke a single expression of relief at his safety. She was as quiet and business-like as ever.

"You must lie here to-night," she said. "Janet hath your room ready. At one o'clock in the morning you must ride: here is a map of your journey. They may come back suddenly. At the place I have marked here with red there is a shepherd's hut; you cannot miss it if you follow the track I have marked. There will be meat and drink there. At night the shepherd will come from the westwards; he is called David, and you may trust him. You must lie there two weeks at least."

"I must have news of the other priests," he said.

Marjorie bowed her head.

"I will send a letter to you by Dick Sampson at the end of two weeks. Until that I can promise nothing. They may have spies round the house by this time to-morrow, or even earlier. And I will send in that letter any news I can get from Derby."

"How shall I find my way?" asked Robin.

"Until it is light you will be on ground that you know." (She flushed slightly.) "Do you remember the hawking, that time after Christmas? It is all across that ground. When daylight comes you can follow this map." (She named one or two landmarks, pointing to them on the map.) "You must have no lantern."

They talked a few minutes longer as to the way he must go and the provision that would be ready for him. He must take no mass requisites with him. David had made that a condition. Then Robin suddenly changed the subject.

"Had my father any hand in this affair at Padley?"

"I am certain he had not."

"They will execute Mr. Garlick and Mr. Ludlam, will they not?"

She bowed her head in assent.

"The Summer Assizes open on the eighteenth," she said. "There is no doubt as to how all will go."

Robin rose.

"It is time I were in bed," he said, "if I must ride at one."

The two women knelt for his blessing.

At one o'clock Marjorie heard the horse brought round. She stepped softly to the window, knowing herself to be invisible, and peeped out.

All was as she had ordered. There was no light of any kind: she could make out but dimly in the summer darkness the two figures of horse and groom. As she looked, a third figure appeared beneath; but there was no word spoken that she could hear. This third figure mounted. She caught her breath as she heard the horse scurry a little with freshness, since every sound seemed full of peril. Then the mounted figure faded one way into the dark, and the groom another.

II.

It was two weeks to the day that Robin received his letter.

He had never before been so long in utter solitude; for the visits of David did not break it; and, for other men, he saw none except a hog-herd or two in the distance once or twice. The shepherd came but once a day, carrying a great jug and a parcel of food, and set them down without the hut; he seemed to avoid even looking within; but merely took the empty jug of the day before and went away again. He was an old, bent man, with a face like a limestone cliff, grey and weather-beaten; he lived half the year up here in the wild Peak country, caring for a few sheep, and going down to the village not more than once or twice a week. There was a little spring welling up in a hollow not fifty yards away from the hut, which itself stood in a deep, natural rift among the high hills, so that men might search for it a lifetime and not come across it.

Robin's daily round was very simple. He had leave to make a fire by day, but he must extinguish it at night lest its glow should be seen; so he began his morning by mixing a little oatmeal, and then preparing his dinner. About noon, so near as he could judge by the sun, he dined; sometimes off a partridge or rabbit; on Fridays off half a dozen tiny trout; and set aside part of the cold food for supper; he had one good loaf

of nearly black bread every day, and the single jug of small beer.

The greater part of the day he spent within the hut, for safety's sake, sleeping a little, and thinking a good deal. He had no books with him; even his breviary had been forbidden, since David, as a shrewd man, had made conditions, first that he should not have to speak with any refugee, second, that if the man were a priest he should have nothing about him that could prove him to be so. Mr. Maine's beads, only, had been permitted, on condition that they were hidden always beneath a stone outside the hut.

After nightfall Robin went out to attend to his horse that was tethered in the next ravine, over a crag; to shift his peg and bring him a good armful of cut grass and a bucket of water. (The saddle and bridle were hidden beneath a couple of great stones that leaned together not far away.) After doing what was necessary for his horse, he went to draw water for himself; and then took his exercise, avoiding carefully, according to instructions, every possible sky-line. And it was then, for the most part, that he did his clear thinking. . . . He tried to fancy himself in a fortnight's retreat, such as he had had at Rheims before his reception of orders.

The evening of the twenty-fifth of July closed in stormy; and Robin, in an old cloak he had found placed in the hut for his own use, made haste to attend to what was necessary, and hurried back as quickly as he could. He sat awhile, listening to the thresh of the rain and the cry of the wind; for, up here in the high

land the full storm broke on him. (The hut was wattled of osiers and clay, and kept out the wet tolerably well.)

He could see nothing from the door of his hut except the dim outline of the nearer crag thirty or forty yards off; and he went presently to bed.

He awoke suddenly, wide awake—as is easy for a man who is sleeping in continual expectation of an alarm—at the flash of light in his eyes. But he was at once reassured by Dick's voice.

"I have come, sir; and I have brought the mistress' letter."

Robin sat up and took the packet. He saw now that the man carried a little lantern with a slide over it that allowed only a thin funnel of light to escape that could be shut off in an instant.

"All well, Dick? I did not hear you coming."

"The storm's too loud, sir."

"All well?"

"Mistress Manners thinks you had best stay here a week longer, sir."

"And . . . and the news?"

"It is all in the letter, sir."

Robin looked for the inscription, but there was none. Then he broke the two seals, opened the paper and began to read. For the next five minutes there was no sound, except the thresh of the rain and the cry of the wind. The letter ran as follows:

III.

"Three more have glorified God to-day by a good confession—Mr. Garlick, Mr. Ludlam and Mr. Simpson. That is the summary. The tale in detail hath been brought to me to day by an eye-witness.

"The trial went as all thought it would. There was never the least question of it; for not only were the two priests taken with signs of their calling upon them, but both of them had been in the hands of the magistrates before. There was no shrinking nor fear showed of any kind. But the chief marvel was that these two priests met with Mr. Simpson in the gaol; they put them together in one room, I think, hoping that Mr. Simpson would prevail upon them to do as he had promised to do; but, by the grace of God, it was all the other way, and it was they who prevailed upon Mr. Simpson to confess himself again openly as a Catholic. This greatly enraged my lord Shrewsbury and the rest; so that there was less hope than ever of any respite, and sentence was passed upon them all together, Mr. Simpson showing, at the reading of it, as much courage as any. This was all done two days ago at the Assizes; and it was to-day that the sentence was carried out.

"They were all three drawn on hurdles together to the open space by St. Mary's Bridge, where all was prepared, with gallows and cauldron and butchering block; and a great company went after them. I have not heard that they spoke much on the way, except

that a friend of Mr. Garlick's cried out to him to remember that they had often shot off together on the moors; to which Mr. Garlick made answer merrily that it was true; but that 'I am now to shoot off such a shot as I never shot in all my life.' He was merry at the trial, too, I hear; and said that 'he was not come to seduce men, but rather to induce them to the Catholic religion, that to this end he had come to the country, and for this that he would work so long as he lived.' And this he did on the scaffold, speaking to the crowd about him of the salvation of their souls, and casting papers, which he had written in prison, in proof of the Catholic faith.

"Mr. Garlick went up the ladder first, kissing and embracing it as the instrument of his death, and to encourage Mr. Simpson, as it was thought, since some said he showed signs of timorousness again when he came to the place. But he showed none when his turn came, but rather exhibited the same courage as them both. Mr. Ludlam stood by smiling while all was done; and smiling still when his turn came. His last words were, '*Venite benedicti Dei*'; and this he said, seeming to see a vision of angels come to bear his soul away.

"They were cut down, all three of them, before they were dead; and the butchery done on them according to sentence; yet none of them cried out or made the least sound; and their heads and quarters were set up immediately afterwards on poles in divers places of Derby; some of them above the house that stands on the bridge and others on the bridge itself. But these, I hear, will not be there long.

"So these three have kept the faith and finished their course with joy. *Laus Deo*. Mr. John is in ward, for harbouring of the priests; but nothing hath been done to him yet.

"As for your reverence, I am of opinion that you had best wait another week where you are. There has been a man or two seen hereabouts whom none knew, as well as at Padley. It hath been certified, too, that Mr. Thomas was at the root of it all, that he gave the information that Mr. John and at least a priest or two would be at Padley at that time, though no man knows how he knew it, unless through servants' talk; and since Mr. Thomas knows your reverence, it will be better to be hid for a little longer. So, if you will, in a week from now, I will send Dick once again to tell you if all be well. I look for no letter back for this, since you have nothing to write with in the hut, as I know; but Dick will tell me how you do; as well as anything you may choose to say to him.

"I ask your reverence's blessing again. I do not forget your reverence in my poor prayers."

And so it ended, without signature—for safety's sake.



IV.

Robin looked up when he had finished to where the faint outline of the servant could be seen behind the lantern, against the greater darkness of the wall.

"You know of all that has fallen at Derby?" he said, with some difficulty.

"Yes, sir."

"Well, pray God we may be willing, too, if He bids us to it."

"Yes, sir. . . ."

"You had best lose no time if you are to be home before dawn. Say to Mistress Manners that I thank her for her letter; that I praise God for the graces she relates in it; and that I will do as she bids. . . . Dick."

"Yes, sir"

"Is Mr. Audrey in any of this?"

"I do not know, sir. . . . I heard——" The man's voice hesitated.

"What did you hear?"

"I heard that my lord Shrewsbury wondered at his absence from the trial; and . . . and that a message would be sent to Mr. Audrey to look to it to be more zealous on her Grace's commission."

"That was all?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then you had best be gone. There is no more

to be said. Bring me what news you can when you come again. Good night, Dick."

"Good night, sir. . . . God bless your reverence."

An hour later, with the first coming of the dawn, the storm ceased. (It was that same storm, if he had only known it, that had blown upon the Spanish Fleet at sea and driven it towards destruction. But of this he knew nothing.) He had not slept since Dick had gone, but had lain on his back on the turfed and blanketed bed in the corner, his hands clasped behind his head, thinking, thinking and re-thinking all that he had read just now. He had known it must happen; but there seemed to him all the difference in the world between an event and its mere certainty. . . . The thing was done—out to every bitter detail of the loathsome, agonising death—and it had been two of the men whom he had seen say mass after himself—the ruddy-faced, breezy countryman, yet anointed with the sealing oil, and the gentle, studious, smiling man who had been no less vigorous than his friend. . . .

But there was one thing he had not known, and that, the recovery of the faint heart which they had inspirited. And then, in an instant he remembered how he had seen the three, years ago, against the sunset, as he rode with Anthony. . . .

His mind was full of the strange memory as he came out at last, when the black darkness began to fade to grey, and the noise of the rain on the roof had ceased, and the wind had fallen.

It was a view of extraordinary solemnity that he looked on, as he stood leaning against the rough door-post. The night was still stronger than day; overhead it was as black as ever, and stars shone in it through the dissolving clouds that were passing at last. But, immediately over the grim, serrated edge of the crag that faced him to the east, a faint and tender light was beginning to burn, so faint that, as yet it seemed an absence of black rather than as of a colour itself; and in the midst of it, like a crumb of diamond, shone a single dying star. This high land was as still now as a sheltered valley, a tuft of springy grass stood out on the crag as stiff as a thin plume; and the silence, as at Padley two weeks ago, was marked rather than broken by the tinkle of water from his spring fifty yards away. The air was cold and fresh and marvellously scented, after the rain, with the clean smell of strong turf and rushes. It was as different from the peace he had had at Padley as water is different from wine; yet it was Peace, too, a confident and expectant peace that precedes the battle, rather than the rest which follows it. . . .

How was it he had seen the three men on the moor; as he turned with Anthony? They were against the crimson west, as against a glory, the two laymen on either side, the young priest in the middle. . . . They had seemed to bear him up and support him; the colour of the sky was as a stain of blood; and their shadows had stretched to his own feet. . . .

And there came on him in that hour one of those vast experiences that can never be told, when a flood

rises in earth and air that turns them all to wine, that wells up through tired limbs, and puzzled brain and beating heart, and soothes and enkindles, all in one; when it is not a mere vision of peace that draws the eyes up in an ecstasy of sight, but a bathing in it, and an envelopment in it, of every fibre of life; when the lungs draw deep breaths of it; and the heart beats in it, and the eyes are enlightened by it; when the things of earth become at once eternal and fixed and of infinite value, and at the same instant of less value than the dust that floats in space; when there no longer appears any distinction between the finite and the eternal, between time and infinity; when the soul for that moment at least finds that rest that is the magnet and the end of all human striving; and that comfort which wipes away all tears.

CHAPTER V.

I.

IT was the sixth night after Dick Sampson had come back with news of Mr. Alban; and he had already received instructions as to how he was to go twenty-four hours later. He was to walk, as before, starting after dark, not carrying a letter this time, after all, in spite of the news that he might have taken with him; for the priest would be back before morning and could hear it all then at his ease.

Every possible cause of alarm had gone; and Marjorie, for the first time for three weeks, felt very nearly as content as a year ago. Not one more doubtful visitor had appeared anywhere; and now she thought herself mistaken even about those solitary figures she had suspected before. After all, they had only been a couple of men, whose faces her servants did not know, who had gone past on the track beneath the house; one mounted, and the other on foot.

There had been something of a reaction, too, in Derby. The deaths of the three priests had made an impression; there was no doubt of that. Mr. Biddell had written her a letter on the point, saying that the blood of those martyrs might well be the peace, if it

might not be the seed, of the Church in the district. Men openly said in the taverns, he reported, that it was hard that any should die for religion merely; politics were one matter and religion another. Yet the deaths had dismayed the simple Catholics, too, for the present; and at Hathersage church, scarcely ten miles away, above two hundred came to the Protestant sermon preached before my lord Shrewsbury on the first Sunday after.

The news of the Armada, too, had distracted men's minds wonderfully in another direction. News had come in already, she was informed, of an engagement or two in the English Channel, all in favour of its defenders. More than that was not known. But the beacons had blazed; and the market-place of Derby had echoed with the tramp of the train-bands; and it was not likely that at such a time the attention of the magistrates would be given to anything else.

So her plans were laid. Mr. Alban was to come here for three or four days; be provided with a complete change of clothes (all of which she had ready); shave off his beard; and then set out again for the border. He had best go to Staffordshire, she thought, for a month or two, before beginning once more in his own county.

She went to bed that night, happy enough, in spite of the cause, which she loved so much, seeming to fail everywhere. It was true that, under this last catastrophe, great numbers had succumbed; but she hoped that this would be but for a time. Let but a few more priests come from Rheims to join the company

that had lost so heavily, and all would be well again. So she said to herself: she did not allow even in her own soul that the security of her friend and the thought that he would be with her in a day or two, had any great part in her satisfaction.

She awaked suddenly. At the moment she did not know what time it was or how long she had slept; but it was still dark and deathly still. Yet she could have sworn that she had heard her name called. The rush-light was burned out; but in the summer night she could still make out the outline of Mistress Alice's bed. Yet all was still there, except for the gentle breathing: it could not have been she who had called out in her sleep, or she would surely show some signs of restlessness.

She sat up listening; but there was not a sound. She lay down again; and the strange fancy seized her that it had been her mother's voice that she had heard. . . . It was in this room that her mother had died. . . . Again she sat up and looked round. All was quiet as before: the tall press at the foot of her bed glimmered here and there with lines and points of starlight.

Then, as again, she began to lie down, there came the signal for which her heart was expectant, though her mind knew nothing of its coming. It was a clear rap, as of a pebble against the glass.

She was up and out of bed in a moment, and was peering out under the thick arch of the little window. And a figure stood there, bending, it seemed, for another pebble; in the very place where she had seen it, she

thought, nearly three weeks ago, standing ready to mount a horse.

Then she was at Alice's bedside.

"Alice," she whispered. "Alice! Wake up. . . . There is someone come. You must come with me. I do not know——" Her voice faltered: she knew that she knew, and fear clutched her by the throat.

The porter was fast asleep, and did not move, as carrying a rush-light she went past the buttery with her friend behind her, saying no word. The bolts were well oiled, and came back with scarcely a sound. Then as the door swung slowly back a figure slipped in.

"Yes," he said, "it is I. . . . I think I am followed. . . . I have but come——"

"Come in quickly," she said, and closed and bolted the door once more.

II.

It was a horrible delight to sit, wrapped in her cloak with the hood over her head, listening to his story in the hall, and to know that it was to her house that he had come for safety. It was horrible to her that he needed it—so horrible that every shred of interior peace had left her; she was composed only in her speech, and it was a strange delight that he had come so simply. He sat there; she could see his outline and the pallor of his face under his hat, and his voice was perfectly resolute and quiet. This was his tale.

"Twice this afternoon," he said, "I saw a man against the sky, opposite my hut. It was the same man both times; he was not a shepherd or a farmer's man. The night before, when David came, he did not speak to me; but for the first time he put his head in at the hut-door when he brought the food and made gestures that I could not understand. I looked at him and shook my head, but he would say nothing, and I remembered the bond and said nothing myself. All that he would do was to shut his eyes and wave his hands. Then this last night he brought no food at all.

"I was uneasy at the sight of the man, too, in the afternoon. I think he thought that I was asleep; for when I saw him for the first time I was lying down and looking at the crag opposite. And I saw him raise himself on his hands against the sky, as if he had been lying flat on his face in the heather. I looked at him for awhile, and then I flung my hand out of bed suddenly, and he was gone in a whisk. I went to the door after a time, stretching myself as if I were just awakened, and there was no sign of him.

"About an hour before sunset I was watching again, and I saw, on a sudden, a covey of birds rise suddenly about two hundred yards away to the north of the hut—that is, by the way that I should have to go down to the valleys again. They rose as if they were frightened. I kept my eyes on the place, and presently I saw a man's hat moving very slowly. It was the movement of a man crawling on his hands, drawing his legs after him.

"Then I waited for David to come, but he did not come, and I determined then to make my way down here as well as I could after dark. If there were any

fellows after me, I should have a better chance of escape than if I stayed in the hut, I thought, until they could fetch up the rest; and, if not, I could lose nothing by coming a day too soon."

"But——" began the girl eagerly.

"Wait," said Robin quietly. "That is not all. I made very poor way on foot (for I thought it better to come quietly than on a horse), and I went round about again and again in the precipitous ground so that, if there were any after me, they could not tell which way I meant to go. For about two hours I heard and saw nothing of any man, and I began to think I was a fool for all my pains. So I sat down a good while and rested, and even thought that I would go back again. But just as I was about to get up again I heard a stone fall a great way behind me: it was on some rocky ground about two hundred yards away. The night was quite still, and I could hear the stone very plainly. . . . It was I that crawled then, farther down the hill, and it was then that I saw once more a man's head move against the stars.

"I went straight on then, as quietly as I could. I made sure that it was but one that was after me, and that he would not try to take me by myself, and I saw no more of him till I came down near Padley——"

"Near Padley? Why——"

"I meant to go there first," said the priest, "and lie there till morning. But as I came down the hill I heard the steps of him again a great way off. So I turned sharp into a little broken ground that lies there, and hid myself among the rocks——"

Mistress Alice lifted her hand suddenly.

"Hark!" she whispered.

Then as the three sat motionless, there came, distinct and clear, from a little distance down the hill, the noise of two or three horses walking over stony ground.

III.

For one deathly instant the two sat looking each into the other's white face—since even the priest changed colour at the sound. (While they had talked the dawn had begun to glimmer, and the windows showed grey and ghostly on the thin morning mist.) Then they rose together. Marjorie was the first to speak.

"You must come upstairs at once," she said. "All is ready there, as you know."

The priest's lips moved without speaking. Then he said suddenly:

"I had best be off the back way; that is, if it is what I think——"

"The house will be surrounded."

"But you will have harboured me——"

Marjorie's lips opened in a smile.

"I have done that in any case," she said. She caught up the candle and blew it out, as she went towards the door.

"Come quickly," she said.

At the door Janet met them. Her old face was all distraught with fear. She had that moment run downstairs again on hearing the noise. Marjorie silenced her by a gesture. . . .

The young carpenter had done his work excellently, and Marjorie had taken care that there had been no neglect since the work had been done. Yet so short was the time since the hearing of the horses' feet, that as the girl slipped out of the press again after drawing back the secret door, there came the loud knocking beneath, for which they had waited with such agony.

"Quick!" she said. . . .

From within, as she waited, came the priest's whisper.

"Is this to be pushed——?"

"Yes; yes."

There was the sound of sliding wood and a little snap. Then she closed the doors of the press again.

IV.

Mr. Audrey outside grew indignant, and the more so since he was unhappy.

He had had the message from my lord Shrewsbury that a magistrate of her Grace should show more zeal; and, along with this, had come a private intimation that it was suspected that Mr. Audrey had at least once warned the recusants of an approaching attack. It would be as well, then, if he would manifest a little activity. . . .

But it appeared to him the worst luck in the world that the hunt should lead him to Mistress Manners' door.

It was late in the afternoon that the informer had made his appearance at Matstead, thirsty and dishevelled, with the news that a man thought to be a Popish priest

was in hiding on the moors; that he was being kept under observation by another informer; and that it was to be suspected that he was the man who had been missed at Padley when my lord had taken Garlick and Ludlam. If it were the man, it would be the priest known by the name of Alban—the fellow whom my lord's man had so much distrusted at Fotheringay, and whom he had seen again in Derby awhile later. Next, if it were this man, he would almost certainly make for Padley if he were disturbed.

Mr. Audrey had bitten his nails awhile as he listened to this, and then had suddenly consented. The plan suggested was simple enough. One little troop should ride to Padley, gathering reinforcements on the way, and another on foot should set out for the shepherd's hut. Then, if the priest should be gone, this second party should come on towards Padley immediately and join forces with the riders.

All this had been done, and the mounted company, led by the magistrate himself, had come up from the valley in time to see the signalling from the heights (contrived by the showing of lights now and again), which indicated that the priest was moving in the direction that had been expected, and that one man at least was on his track. They had waited there, in the valley, till the intermittent signals had reached the level ground and ceased, and had then ridden up cautiously in time to meet the informer's companion, and to learn that the fugitive had doubled suddenly back towards Booth's Edge. There they had waited then, till the dawn was imminent, and, with it, there came the party on foot, as had been arranged; then, all together, numbering about

twenty-five men, they had pushed on in the direction of Mistress Manners' house.

As the house came into view, more than ever Mr. Audrey reproached his evil luck. Certainly there still were two or three chances to one that no priest would be taken at all; since, first, the man might not be a priest, and next, he might have passed the manor and plunged back again into the hills. But it was not very pleasant work, this rousing of a house inhabited by a woman for whom the magistrate had very far from unkindly feelings, and on such an errand. . . . So the informers marvelled at the venom with which Mr. Audrey occasionally whispered at them in the dark.

His heart sank as he caught a glimpse of a light first showing, and then suddenly extinguished, in the windows of the hall, but he was relieved to hear no comment on it from the men who walked by his horse; he even hoped that they had not seen it. . . . But he must do his duty, he said to himself.

He grew a little warm and impatient when no answer came to the knocking. He said such play-acting was absurd. Why did not the man come out courageously and deny that he was a priest? He would have a far better excuse for letting him go.

"Knock again," he cried.

And again the thunder rang through the archway, and the summons in the Queen's name to open.

Then at last a light shone beneath the door. (It was brightening rapidly towards the dawn here in the open air, but within it would still be dark.) Then a voice grumbled within.

"Who is there?"

"Man," bellowed the magistrate, "open the door and have done with it. I tell you I am a magistrate!"

There was silence. Then the voice came again.

"How do I know that you are?"

Mr. Audrey slipped off his horse, scrambled to the door, set his hands on his knees and his mouth to the keyhole.

"Open the door, you fool, in the Queen's name. . . . I am Mr. Audrey, of Matstead."

Again came the pause. The magistrate was in the act of turning to bid his men beat the door in, when once more the voice came.

"I'll tell the mistress, sir. . . . She's a-bed."

His discomfort grew on him as he waited, staring out at the fast yellowing sky. (Beneath him the slopes towards the valley and the far-off hills on the other side appeared like a pencil drawing, delicate, minute and colourless, or, at the most, faintly tinted in phantoms of their own colours. The sky, too, was grey with the night mists not yet dissolved.) It was an unneighbourly action, this of his, he thought. He must do his best to make it as little offensive as he could. He turned to his men.

"Now, men," he said, glaring like a judge, "no violence here, unless I give the order. No breaking of aught in the house. The lady here is a friend of mine; and——"

The great bolts shot back suddenly; he turned as the door opened; and there, pale as milk, with eyes

that seemed a-fire, Marjorie's face was looking at him; she was wrapped in her long cloak and her hood was drawn over her head. The space behind was crowded with faces, unrecognisable in the shadow.

He saluted her.

"Mistress Manners," he said, "I am sorry to incommode you in this way. But a couple of fellows tell me that a man hath come this way, whom they think to be a priest. I am a magistrate, mistress, and——"

He stopped, confounded by her face. It was not like her face at all—the face, rather, seemed as nothing; her whole soul was in her eyes, crying to him some message that he could not understand. It appeared impossible to him that this was a mere entreaty that he should leave one more priest at liberty; impossible that the mere shock and surprise should have changed her so. . . . He looked at her. . . . Then he began again:

"It is no will of mine, mistress, beyond my duty. But I hold her Grace's commission——"

She swept back again, motioning him to enter. He was astonished at his own discomfort, but he followed, and his men pressed close after; and he noticed, even in that twilight, that a look of despair went over the girl's face, sharp as pain, as she saw them.

"You have come to search my house, sir?" she asked. Her voice was as colourless as her features.

"My commission, mistress, compels me——"

Then he noticed that the doors into the hall had been pushed open, and that she was moving towards them. And he thought he understood.

"Stand back, men," he barked, so fiercely that they recoiled. "This lady shall speak with me first."

• He passed up the hall after her. He was as unhappy as possible. He wondered what she could have to say to him; she must surely understand that no pleading could turn him; he must do his duty. Yet he would certainly do this with as little offence as he could.

"Mistress Manners——" he began.

Then she turned on him again. They were at the farther end of the hall, and could speak low without being overheard.

"You must begone again," she whispered. "Oh! you must begone again. You do not understand; you——"

Her eyes still burned with that terrible eloquence; it was as the face of one on the rack.

"Mistress, I cannot begone again. I must do my duty. But I promise you——"

She was close to him, staring into his face; he could feel the heat of her breath on his face.

"You must begone at once," she whispered, still in that voice of agony. He saw her begin to sway on her feet and her eyes turn glassy. He caught her as she swayed.

"Here! you women!" he cried.

It was all that he could do to force himself out through the crowd of folks that looked on him. It was not that they barred his way. Rather they shrank from

him; yet their eyes pulled and impeded him; it was by a separate effort that he put each foot before the other. Behind he could hear the long moan that she had given die into silence, and the chattering whispers of her women who held her. He reassured himself savagely; he would take care that no one was taken . . . she would thank him presently; he would but set guards at all the doors and make a cursory search; he would break a panel or two; no more. And that would save both his face and her own. . . . Yet he loathed even such work as this . . .

He turned abruptly as he came into the buttery passage.

"All the women in the hall," he said sharply. "Jack, keep the door fast till we are done."

V.

He took particular pains to do as little damage as possible.

First he went through the out-houses, himself with a pike testing the haystacks, where he was sure that no man could be hidden. The beasts turned slow and ruminating eyes upon him as he went by their stalls.

As he passed, a little later, the inner door into the buttery passage, he could hear the beating of hands on the hall-door. He went on quickly to the kitchen, hating himself, yet determined to get all done quickly, and drove the kitchen-maid, who was crouching by the unlighted fire, out behind him, sending a man with her to bestow her in the hall. She wailed as she went by him,

but it was unintelligible, and he was in no mood for listening.

"Take her in," he said; "but let no one out, nor a message, till all is done." (He thought that the kinder course.)

Then at last he went upstairs, still with his little bodyguard of four, of whom one was the man who had followed the fugitive down from the hills.

He began with the little rooms over the hall: a bedstead stood in one; in another was a table all piled with linen; a third had its floor covered with early autumn fruit, ready for preserving. He struck on a panel or two as he went, for form's sake.

As he came out again he turned savagely on the informer.

"It is damned nonsense," he said; "the fellow's not here at all. I told you he'd have gone back to the hills."

The man looked up at him with a furtive kind of sneer in his face; he, too, was angry enough; the loss of the priest meant the loss of the heavy reward.

"We have not searched a room rightly yet, sir," he snarled. "There are a hundred places——"

"Not searched! You villain! Why, what would you have?"

"It's not the manner I've done it before, sir. A pike-thrust here, and a blow there——"

"I tell you I will not have the house injured! Mistress Manners——"

"Very good, sir. Your honour is the magistrate. . . . I am not."

The old man's temper boiled over. They were pass-

ing at that instant a half-open door, and within he could see a bare little parlour, with linen presses against the walls. It would not hide a cat.

"Do you search, then!" he cried. "Here, then, and I will watch you! But you shall pay for any wanton damage, I tell you."

The man shrugged his shoulders.

"What is the use, then——" he began.

"Bah! search, then, as you will. I will pay."

The noise from the hall had ceased altogether as the four men went into the parlour. It was a plain little room, with an open fireplace and a great settle beside it. There were hangings here and there. That over the hearth presented Icarus in the chariot of the sun. It seemed such a place as that in which two lovers might sit and talk together at sunset. . . . In one place hung a dark oil-painting.

The old man went across to the window and stared out.

The sun was up by now, far away out of sight; and the whole sunlit valley lay stretched beneath beyond the slopes that led down to Padley. The loathing for his work rose up again and choked him—this desperate bullying of a few women; and all to no purpose. He stared out at the horses beneath, and at the couple of men gossiping together at their heads. . . . He determined to see Mistress Manners again alone presently, when she should be recovered, and have a word with her in private. She would forgive him, perhaps, when she saw him ride off empty-handed, as he most certainly meant to do.

He thought, too, of other things, this old man, as he stood, with his shoulders squared, resolute in his lack of attention to the mean work going on behind him. . . . He wondered whether God were angry or no. Whether this kind of duty were according to His will. Down there was Padley, where he had heard mass in the old days; Padley, where the two priests had been taken a few weeks ago. He wondered——”

“If it please your honour we will break in this panel,” came the smooth, sneering voice that he loathed.

He turned sullenly.

They were opposite the old picture. Beneath it there showed a crack in the wainscoting. . . . He could scarcely refuse leave. Besides, the woodwork was flawed in any case—he would pay for a new panel himself.

“There is nothing there!” he said doubtfully.

“Oh, no, sir,” said the man with a peculiar look. “It is but to make a show——”

The old man’s brows came down angrily. Then he nodded; and, leaning against the window, watched them.

One of his own men came forward with a hammer and chisel. He placed the chisel at the edge of the cracked panel, where the informer directed, and struck a blow or two. There was the unmistakable dull sound of wood against stone—not an echo of resonance. The old man smiled grimly to himself. The man must be a fool if he thought there could be any hole there! . . . Well; he would let them do what they would here; and then forbid any further damage. . . . He wondered if the priest really were in the house or no.

The two men had their heads together now, eyeing the crack they had made. . . . Then the informer said something in a low voice that the old man could not hear; and the other, handing him the chisel and hammer, went out of the room, beckoning to one of the two others that stood waiting at the door.

"Well?" sneered the old man. "Have you caught your bird?"

"Not yet, sir."

He could hear the steps of the others in the next room; and then silence.

"What are they doing there?" he asked suddenly.

"Nothing, sir. . . . I just bade a man wait on that side."

The man was once more inserting the chisel in the top of the wainscoting; then he presently began to drive it down with the hammer as if to detach it from the wall.

Suddenly he stopped; and at the same instant the old man heard some faint, muffled noise, as of footsteps moving either in the wall or beyond it.

"What is that?"

The man said nothing; he appeared to be listening.

"What is that?" demanded the other again, with a strange uneasiness at his heart. Was it possible, after all! Then the man dropped his chisel and hammer and darted out and vanished. A sudden noise of voices and trappings broke out somewhere out of sight.

"God's blood!" roared the old man in anger and dismay. "I believe they have the poor devil!"

He ran out, two steps down the passage and in again

at the door of the next room. It was a bedroom, with two beds side by side: a great press with open doors stood between the hearth and the window; and, in the midst of the floor, five men struggled and swayed together. The fifth was a bearded young man, well dressed; but he could not see his face.

Then they had him tight; his hands were twisted behind his back; an arm was flung round his neck; and another man, crouching, had his legs embraced. He cried out once or twice. . . . The old man turned sick . . . a great rush of blood seemed to be hammering in his ears and dilating his eyes. . . . He ran forward, tearing at the arm that was choking the prisoner's throat, and screaming he knew not what.

And it was then that he knew for certain that this was his son.

CHAPTER VI.

I.

ROBIN drew a long breath as the door closed behind him. Then he went forward to the table, and sat on it, swinging his feet, and looking carefully and curiously round the room, so far as the darkness would allow him; his eyes had had scarcely time yet to become accustomed to the change from the brilliant sunshine outside to the gloom of the prison. It was his first experience of prison, and, for the present, he was more interested than subdued by it.

It seemed to him that a lifetime had passed since the early morning, up in the hills, when he had attempted to escape by the bedroom, and had been seized as he came out of the press. Of course, he had fought; it was his right and his duty; and he had not known the utter uselessness of it, in that guarded house. He had known nothing of what was going forward. He had heard the entrance of the searchers below, and now and again their footsteps. . . . Then he had seen the wainscoting begin to gape before him, and had understood that his only chance was by the way he had

Come Rack! Come Rope! II.

15

entered. Then, as he had caught sight of his father, he had ceased his struggles.

He had not said one word to him. The shock was complete and unexpected. He had seen the old man stagger back and sink on the bed. Then he had been hurried from the room and downstairs. As the party came into the buttery entrance, there had been a great clamour; the man on guard at the hall doors had run forward; the doors had opened suddenly and Marjorie had come out, with a surge of faces behind her. But to her, too, he had said nothing; he had tried to smile; he was still faint and sick from the fight upstairs. But he had been pushed out into the air, where he saw the horses waiting, and round the corner of the house into an out-building, and there he had had time to recover.

It was strange how little religion had come to his aid during that hour of waiting; and, indeed, during the long and weary ride to Derby. He had tried to pray; but he had had no consolation, such as he supposed must surely come to all who suffered for Christ. It had been, instead, the tiny things that absorbed his attention; the bundle of hay in the corner; an ancient pitch-fork; the heads of his guards outside the little barred window; the sound of their voices talking. Later, when a man had come out from the house, and looked in at his door, telling him that they must start in ten minutes, and giving him a hunch of bread to eat, it had been the way the man's eyebrows grew over his nose, and the creases of his felt hat, to which he gave his mind. Somewhere, far beneath in himself, he knew that

there were other considerations and memories and movements, that were even fears and hopes and desires; but he could not come at these; he was as a man struggling to dive, held up on the surface by sheets of cork. He knew that his father was in that house; that it was his father who had been the means of taking him; that Marjorie was there—yet these facts were as tales read in a book. So, too, with his faith; his lips repeated words now and then; but God was as far from him and as inconceivably unreal, as is the thought of sunshine and a garden to a miner freezing painlessly in the dark. . . .

In the same state he was led out again presently, and set on a horse. And while a man attached one foot to the other by a cord beneath the horse's belly, he looked like a child at the arched doorway of the house; at a patch of lichen that was beginning to spread above the lintel; at the open window of the room above.

He vaguely desired to speak with Marjorie again; he even asked the man who was tying his feet whether he might do so; but he got no answer. A group of men watched him from the door, and he noticed that they were silent. He wondered if it were the tying of his feet in which they were so much absorbed.

Little by little, as they rode, this oppression began to lift. Half a dozen times he determined to speak with the man who rode beside him and held his horse

by a leading-rein; and each time he did not speak. Neither did any man speak to him. Another man rode behind; and a dozen or so went on foot. He could hear them talking together in low voices.

He was finally roused by his companion's speaking. He had noticed the man look at him now and again strangely and not unkindly.

"Is it true that you are a son of Mr. Audrey, sir?"

He was on the point of saying "Yes," when his mind seemed to come back to him as clear as an awakening from sleep. He understood that he must not identify himself if he could help it. He had been told at Rheims that silence was best in such matters.

"Mr. Audrey?" he said. "The magistrate?"

The man nodded. He did not seem an unkindly personage at all. Then he smiled.

"Well, well," he said. "Less said——"

He broke off and began to whistle. Then he interrupted himself once more.

"He was still in his fit," he said, "when we came away. Mistress Manners was with him."

Intelligence was flowing back in Robin's brain like a tide. It seemed to him that he perceived things with an extraordinary clearness and rapidity. He understood he must show no dismay or horror of any kind; he must carry himself easily and detachedly.

"In a fit, was he?"

The other nodded.

"I am arrested on his warrant, then? And on what charge?"

The man laughed outright.

"That's too good," he said. "Why, we have a

bundle of popery on the horse behind! It was all in the hiding-hole!"

"I am supposed to be a priest, then?" said Robin, with admirable disdain.

Again the man laughed.

"They will have some trouble in proving that," said Robin viciously.

He learned presently whither they were going. He was right in thinking it to be Derby. There he was to be handed over to the gaoler. The trial would probably come on at the Michaelmas assizes, five or six weeks hence. He would have leave to communicate with a lawyer when he was once safely bestowed there; but whether or no his lawyer or any other visitors would be admitted to him was a matter for the magistrates.

They ate as they rode, and reached Derby in the afternoon.

At the very outskirts the peculiar nature of this cavalcade was observed; and by the time that they came within sight of the market-square a considerable mob was hustling along on all sides. There were a few cries raised. Robin could not distinguish the words, but it seemed to him as if some were raised for him as well as against him. He kept his head somewhat down; he thought it better to risk no complications that might arise should he be recognised.

As they drew nearer the market-place the progress became yet slower, for the crowd seemed suddenly and abnormally swelled. There was a great shouting of voices, too, in front, and the smell of burning came dis-

tinctly on the breeze. The man riding beside Robin turned his head and called out; and in answer one of the others riding behind pushed his horse up level with the other two, so that the prisoner had a guard on either side. A few steps further, and another order was issued, followed by the pressing up of the men that went on foot so as to form a complete square about the three riders.

Robin put a question, but the men gave him no answer. He could see that they were preoccupied and anxious. Then, as step by step they made their way forward and gained the corner of the market-place, he saw the reason of these precautions; for the whole square was one pack of heads, except where, somewhere in the midst, a great bonfire blazed in the sunlight. The noise, too, was deafening; drums were beating, horns blowing, men shouting aloud. From window after window leaned heads, and, as the party advanced yet further, they came suddenly in view of a scaffold hung with gay carpets and ribbons, on which a civil dignitary, in some official dress, was gesticulating.

It was useless to ask a question; not a word could have been heard unless it were shouted aloud; and presently the din redoubled, for out of sight, round some corner, guns were suddenly shot off one after another; and the cheering grew shrill and piercing in contrast.

As they came out at last, without attracting any great attention, into the more open space at the entrance of Friar's Gate, Robin turned again and asked what the matter was. It was plainly not himself, as he had at first almost believed.

The man turned an exultant face to him.

"It's the Spanish fleet!" he said. "There's not a ship of it left, they say."

When they halted at the gate of the prison there was another pause, while the cord that tied his feet was cut, and he was helped from his horse, as he was stiff and constrained from the long ride under such circumstances. He heard a roar of interest and abuse, and, perhaps, a little sympathy, from the part of the crowd that had followed, as the gate closed behind him.

II.

As his eyes became better accustomed to the dark, he began to see what kind of a place it was in which he found himself. It was a square little room on the ground-floor, with a single, heavily-barred window, against which the dirt had collected in such quantities as to exclude almost all light. The floor was beaten earth, damp and uneven; the walls were built of stones and timber, and were dripping with moisture; there was a table and a stool in the centre of the room, and a dark heap in the corner. He examined this presently, and found it to be rotting hay covered with some kind of rug. The whole place smelled hideously foul.

From far away outside came still the noise of cheering, heard as through wool, and the sharp reports of the cannon they were still firing. The Armada seemed very remote from him, here in ward. Its destruction affected him now hardly at all, except for the worse, since an anti-Catholic reaction might very well follow. . . . He

set himself, with scarcely an effort, to contemplate more personal matters.

He was astonished that his purse had not been taken from him. He had been searched rapidly just now, in an outer passage, by a couple of men, one of whom he understood to be his gaoler; and a knife and a chain and his rosary had been taken from him. But the purse had been put back again. . . . He remembered presently that the possession of money made a considerable difference to a prisoner's comfort; but he determined to do as little as he was obliged in this way. He might need the money more urgently by-and-by.

By the time that he had gone carefully round his prison-walls, even reaching up to the window and testing the bars, pushing as noiselessly as he could against the door, pacing the distances in every direction—he had, at the same time, once more arranged and rehearsed every piece of evidence that he possessed, and formed a number of resolutions.

He was perfectly clear by now that his father had been wholly ignorant of the identity of the man he was after. The horror in the gasping face that he had seen so close to his own, above the strangling arm, set that beyond a doubt; the news of the fit into which his father had fallen confirmed it.

Next, he had been right in believing himself watched in the shepherd's hut, and followed down from it. This hiding of his in the hills, the discovery of him in the hiding-hole, together with the vestments—these two things were the heaviest pieces of testimony against him. More remote testimony might be brought forward from

his earlier adventures—his presence at Fotheringay, his recognition by my lord's man. But these were, in themselves, indifferent.

His resolutions were few and simple.

He would behave himself quietly in all ways: he would make no demand to see anyone; since he knew that whatever was possible would be done for him by Marjorie. He would deny nothing and assert very little if he were brought before the magistrates. Finally, he would say, if he could, a dry mass every day; and observe the hours of prayer so far as he could. He had no books with him of any kind. But he could pray God for fortitude.

Then he knelt down on the earth floor and said his first prayer in prison; the prayer that had rung so often in his mind since Mary herself had prayed it aloud on the scaffold; and Mr. Bourgoign had repeated it to him.

"As thy arms, O Christ, were extended on the Cross; even so receive me into the arms of Thy mercy, and blot out all my sins with Thy most precious Blood."

CHAPTER VII.

I.

THERE was a vast crowd in the market-place at Michaelmas to see the judges come—partly because there was always excitement at the visible majesty of the law; partly because the tale of one at least of the prisoners had roused interest. It was a dramatic tale: he was first a seminary priest and a Derbyshire man (many remembered him riding as a little lad beside his father); he was, next, a runaway to Rheims for religion's sake, when his father conformed; third, he had been taken in the house of Mistress Manners, to whom, report said, he had once been betrothed; last, he had been taken by his father himself. All this furnished matter for a quantity of conversation in the taverns; and it was freely discussed by the sentimental whether or no, if the priest yielded and conformed, he would yet find Mistress Manners willing to wed him.

Signs of the Armada rejoicings still survived in the market-place as the judges rode in. Streamers hung in the sunshine, rather bedraggled after so long, from the roof and pillars of the Guildhall, and a great smoke-blackened patch between the conduit and the cross

marked where the ox had been roasted. There was a deal of loyal cheering as the procession went by; for these splendid personages on horseback stood to the mob for the power that had repelled the enemies of England; and her Grace's name was received with enthusiasm. Behind the judges and their escort came a cavalcade of riders—gentlemen, grooms, servants, and agents of all sorts. But not a Derby man noticed or recognised a thin gentleman who rode modestly in the midst, with a couple of personal servants on either side of him. It was not until the visitors had separated to the various houses and inns where they were to be lodged, and the mob was dispersing home again, that it began to be rumoured everywhere that Mr. Topcliffe was come again to Derby on a special mission.

II.

The tidings came to Marjorie as she leaned back in her chair in Mr. Biddell's parlour and listened to the last shoutings.

She had been in town now three days.

Ever since the capture she had been under guard in her own house till three days ago. Four men had been billeted upon her, not, indeed, by the orders of Mr. Audrey, since Mr. Audrey was in no condition to control affairs any longer, but by the direction of Mr. Columbello, who had himself ridden out to take charge at Booth's Edge, when the news of the arrest had come, with the prisoner himself, to the city. It was he, too,

who had seen to the removal of Mr. Audrey a week later, when he had recovered from the weakness caused by the fit sufficiently to travel as far as Derby; for it was thought better that the magistrate who had effected the capture should be accessible to the examining magistrates. It was, of course, lamentable, said Mr. Columbello, that father and son should have been brought into such relations, and he would do all that he could to relieve Mr. Audrey from any painful task in which they could do without him. But her Grace's business must be done, and he had had special messages from my lord Shrewsbury himself that the prisoner must be dealt with sternly. It was believed, wrote my lord, that Mr. Alban, as he called himself, had a good deal more against him than the mere fact of being a seminary priest: it was thought that he had been involved in the Babington plot, and had at least once had access to the Queen of the Scots since the fortunate failure of the conspiracy.

All this, then, Marjorie knew from Mr. Biddell, who seemed always to know everything; but it was not until the evening on which the judges arrived that she learned the last and extreme measures that would be taken to establish these suspicions. She had ridden openly to Derby so soon as the news came from there that for the present she might be set at liberty.

The lawyer came into the darkening room as the square outside began to grow quiet, and Marjorie opened her eyes to see who it was.

He said nothing at first, but sat down close beside her. He knew she must be told, but he hated the

telling. He carried a little paper in his hand. He would begin with that little bit of good news first, he said to himself.

"Well, mistress," he said, "I have the order at last. We are to see him to-night. It is 'for Mr. Biddell and a friend.'"

She sat up, and a little vitality came back to her face; for a moment she almost looked as she had looked in the early summer.

"To-night?" she said. "And when——"

"He will not be brought before my lords for three or four days yet. There is a number of cases to come before his. It will give us those two or three days, at least, to prepare our case."

He spoke heavily and dejectedly. Up to the present he had been utterly refused permission to see his client; and though he knew the outlines of the affair well enough, he knew very little of the thousand details on which the priest would ask his advice. It was a hopeless affair, it appeared to the lawyer, in any case. And now, with this last piece of tidings, he knew that there was, indeed, nothing to be said except words of encouragement.

He listened with the same heavy air to Mistress Manners as she said a word or two as to what must be spoken of to Robin. She was very quiet and collected, and talked to the point. But he said nothing.

"What is the matter, sir?" she said.

He lifted his eyes to hers. There was still enough light from the windows for him to see her eyes, and that there was a spark in them that had not been there

just now. And it was for him to extinguish it. . . . He gripped his courage.

"I have had worse news than all," he said.

Her lips moved, and a vibration went over her face. Her eyes blinked, as at a sudden light.

"Yes?"

He put his hand tenderly on her arm.

"You must be courageous," he said. "It is the worst news that ever came to me. It concerns one who is come from London to-day, and rode in with my lords."

She could not speak, but her great eyes entreated him to finish her misery.

"Yes," he said, still pressing his hand onto her arm. "Yes; it is Mr. Topcliffe who is come."

He felt the soft muscles harden like steel. . . . There was no sound except the voices talking in the square and the noise of footsteps across the pavements. He could not look at her.

Then he heard her draw a long breath and breathe it out again, and her taut muscles relaxed.

"We . . . we are all in Christ's hands," she said. . . . "We must tell him."

III.

It appeared to the girl as if she were moving on a kind of set stage, with every movement and incident designed beforehand, in a play that was itself a kind of

destiny—above all, when she went at last into Robin's cell and saw him standing there, and found it to be that in which so long ago she had talked with Mr. Thomas FitzHerbert. . . .

The great realities were closing round her, as irresistible as wheels and bars. There was scarcely a period in her life, scarcely a voluntary action of hers for good or evil, that did not furnish some part of this vast machine in whose grip both she and her friend were held so fast. No calculation on her part could have contrived so complete a climax; yet hardly a calculation that had not gone astray from that end to which she had designed it. It was as if some monstrous and ironical power had been beneath and about her all her life long, using those thoughts and actions that she had intended in one way to the development of another.

First, it was she that had first turned her friend's mind to the life of a priest. Had she submitted to natural causes, she would have been his wife nine years ago; they would have been harassed no doubt and troubled, but no more. It was she again that had encouraged his return to Derbyshire. If it had not been for that, and for the efforts she had made to do what she thought good work for God, he might have been sent elsewhere. It was in her house that he had been taken, and in the very place she had designed for his safety. If she had but sent him on, as he wished, back to the hills again, he might never have been taken at all. These, and a score of other thoughts, had raced continually through her mind; she felt even as if she were responsible for the manner of his taking, and for

the horror that it had been his father who had accomplished it; if she had said more, or less, in the hall on that dark morning; if she had not swooned; if she had said bravely: "It is your son, sir, who is here," all might have been saved. And now it was Topcliffe who was come—(and she knew all that this signified)—the very man at whose mere bodily presence she had sickened in the court of the Tower. And, last, it was she who had to tell Robin of this.

So tremendous, however, had been the weight of these thoughts upon her, crowned and clinched (so to say) by finding that the priest was even in the same cell as that in which she had visited the traitor, that there was no room any more for bitterness. Even as she waited, with Mr. Biddell behind her, as the gaoler fumbled with the keys, she was aware that the last breath of resentment had been drawn. . . . It was, indeed, a monstrous Power that had so dealt with her. . . . It was none other than the Will of God, plain at last.

She knelt down for the priest's blessing, without speaking, as the door closed, and Mr. Biddell knelt behind her. Then she rose and went forward to the stool and sat upon it.

He was hardly changed at all. He looked a little white and drawn in the wavering light of the flambeau; but his clothes were orderly and clean, and his eyes as bright and resolute as ever.

"It is a great happiness to see you," he said, smiling, and then no more compliments.

"And what of my father?" he added instantly.

She told him. Mr. Audrey was in Derby, still sick from his fit. He was in Mr. Columbell's house. She had not seen him.

"Robin," she said (and she used the old name, utterly unknowing that she did so), "we must speak with Mr. Biddell presently about your case. But there is a word or two I have to say first. We can have two hours here, if you wish it."

Robin put his hands behind him onto the table and jumped lightly, so that he sat on it, facing her.

"If you will not sit on the table, Mr. Biddell, I fear there is only that block of wood."

He pointed to a block of a tree set on end. It served him, laid flat, as a pillow. The lawyer went across to it.

"The judges, I hear, are come to-night," said the priest.

She bowed.

"Yes; but your case will not be up for three or four days yet."

"Why, then, I shall have time——"

She lifted her hand sharply a little to check him.

"You will not have much time," she said, and paused again. A sharp contraction came and went in the muscles of her throat. It was as if a hand gripped her there, relaxed, and gripped again. She put up her own hand desperately to tear at her collar.

"Why, but——" began the priest.

She could bear it no more. His resolute cheerfulness, his frank astonishment, were like knives to her. She gave one cry.

"Topcliffe is come . . . Topcliffe! . . ." she cried.

Then she flung her arm across the table and dropped her face on it. No tears came from her eyes, but tearing sobs shook and tormented her.

It was quite quiet after she had spoken. Even in her anguish she knew that. The priest did not stir from where he sat a couple of feet away; only the swinging of his feet ceased. She drove down her convulsions; they rose again; she drove them down once more. Then the tears surged up, her whole being relaxed, and she felt a hand on her shoulder.

"Marjorie," said the grave voice, as steady as it had ever been, "Marjorie. This is what we looked for, is it not? . . . Topcliffe is come, is he? Well, let him come. He or another. It is for this that we have all looked since the beginning. Christ His Grace is strong enough, is it not? It hath been strong enough for many, at least; and He will not surely take it from me who need it so much. . . ." (He spoke in pauses, but his voice never faltered.) "I have prayed for that grace ever since I have been here. . . . He hath given me great peace in this place. . . . I think He will give it me to the end. . . . You must pray, my . . . my child; you must not cry like that."

(She lifted her agonised face for a moment, then she let it fall again. It seemed as if he knew the very thoughts of her.)

"This all seems very perfect to me," he went on. "It was yourself who first turned me to this life, and you knew surely what you did. I knew, at least, all the while, I think; and I have never ceased to thank God.

And it was through your hands that the letter came to me to go to Fotheringay. And it was in your house that I was taken. . . . And it was Mr. Maine's beads that they found on me when they searched me here—the pair of beads you gave me.”

Again she stared at him, blind and bewildered.

He went on steadily:

“And now it is you again who bring me the first news of my passion. It is yourself, first and last, under God, that have brought me all these graces and crosses. And I thank you with all my heart. . . . But you must pray for me to the end, and after it, too.”

CHAPTER VIII.

I.

"WATER," said a sharp voice, pricking through the enormous thickness of the bloodshot dark that had come down on him. There followed a sound of floods; then a sense of sudden coolness, and he opened his eyes once more, and became aware of unbearable pain in arms and feet. Again the whirling dark, striped with blood-colour, fell on him like a blanket; again the sound of waters falling and the sense of coolness, and again he opened his eyes.

For a minute or two it was all that he could do to hold himself in consciousness. It appeared to him a necessity to do so. He could see a smoke-stained roof of beams and rafters, and on these he fixed his eyes, thinking that he could hold himself so, as by thin, wiry threads of sight, from falling again into the pit where all was black or blood-colour. The pain was appalling, but he thought he had gripped it at last, and could hold it so, like a wrestler.

As the pain began to resolve itself into throbs and stabs, from the continuous strain in which at first it had shown itself—a strain that was like a shrill horn blowing,

or a blaze of bluish light—he began to see more, and to understand a little. There were four or five faces looking down on him: one was the face of a man he had seen somewhere in an inn . . . it was at Fotheringay; it was my lord Shrewsbury's man. Another was a lean face; a black hat came and went behind it; the lips were drawn in a sort of smile, so that he could see the teeth. . . . Then he perceived next that he himself was lying in a kind of shallow trough of wood upon the floor. He could see his bare feet raised a little and tied with cords.

Then, one by one, these sights fitted themselves into one another and made sense. He remembered that he was in Derby gaol—not in his own cell; that the lean face was of a man called Topcliffe; that a physician was there as well as the others; that they had been questioning him on various points, and that some of these points he had answered, while others he had not, and must not. Some of them concerned her Grace of the Scots. . . . These he had answered. Then, again, association came back. . . .

“As Thy arms, O Christ . . .” he whispered.

“Now then,” came the sharp voice in his ear, so close and harsh as to distress him. “These questions again. . . . Were there any other places besides at Padley and Booth's Edge, in the parish of Hathersage, where you said mass?”

“ . . . O Christ, were extended on the Cross——” began the tortured man dreamily. “Ah-h-h!” . . .

It was a scream, whispered rather than shrieked, that was torn from him by the sharpness of the agony. His body had lifted from the floor without will of his own,

twisting a little; and what seemed as strings of fiery pain had shot upwards from his feet and downwards from his wrists as the roller was suddenly jerked again. He hung there perhaps ten or fifteen seconds, conscious only of the blinding pain—questions, questioners, roof and faces all gone and drowned again in a whirling tumult of darkness and red streaks. The sweat poured again suddenly from his whole body. . . . Then again he sank relaxed upon the floor, and the pulses beat in his head, and he thought that Marjorie and her mother and his own father were all looking at him. . . .

He heard presently the same voice talking:

“—and answer the questions that are put to you. . . . Now then, we will begin the others, if it please you better. . . . In what month was it that you first became privy to the plot against her Grace?”

“Wait!” whispered the priest. “Wait, and I will answer that.” (He understood that there was a trap here. The question had been framed differently last time. But his mind was all a-whirl; and he feared he might answer wrongly if he could not collect himself. He still wondered why so many friends of his were in the room—even Father Campion. . . .)

He drew a breath again presently, and tried to speak; but his voice broke like a shattered trumpet, and he could not command it. . . . He must whisper.

“It was in August, I think. . . . I think it was August, two years ago.” . . .

“August . . . you mean May or April.”

“No; it was August. . . . At least, all that I know of the plot was when . . . when——” (His thoughts became confused again; it was like strings of wool, he

thought, twisted violently together; a strand snapped now and again. He made a violent effort and caught an end as it was slipping away.) "It was in August, I think; the day that Mr. Babington fled, that he wrote to me; and sent me——" (He paused: he became aware that here, too, lurked a trap if he were to say he had seen Mary; he would surely be asked what he had seen her for, and his priesthood might be so proved against him. . . . He could not remember whether that had been proved; and so . . . would Father Campion advise him perhaps whether . . .)

The voice jarred again; and startled him into a flash of coherence. He thought he saw a way out.

"Well?" snapped the voice. "Sent you? . . . Sent you whither?"

"Sent me to Chartley; where I saw her Grace . . . her Grace of the Scots; and . . . 'As Thy arms, O Christ . . .'"

"Now then; now then——! . . . So you saw her Grace? And what was that for?"

"I saw her Grace . . . and . . . and told her what Mr. Babington had told me."

"What was that, then?"

"That . . . that he was her servant till death; and . . . and a thousand if he had them. And so, 'As Thy arms, O——'"

"Water," barked the voice.

Again came the rush as of cataracts; and a sensation of drowning. There followed an instant's glow of life; and then the intolerable pain came back; and the heavy, red-streaked darkness. . . .

II.

He found himself, after some period, lying more easily. He could not move hand or foot. His body only appeared to live. From his shoulders to his thighs he was alive; the rest was nothing. But he opened his eyes and saw that his arms were laid by his side; and that he was no longer in the wooden trough. He wondered at his hands; he wondered even if they were his . . . they were of an unusual colour and bigness; and there was something like a tight-fitting bracelet round each wrist. Then he perceived that he was shirtless and hoseless; and that the bracelets were not bracelets, but rings of swollen flesh. But there was no longer any pain or even sensation in them; and he was aware that his mouth glowed as if he had drunk ardent spirits.

He was considering all this, slowly, like a child contemplating a new toy. Then there came something between him and the light; he saw a couple of faces eyeing him. Then the voice began again, at first confused and buzzing, then articulate; and he remembered.

"Now, then," said the voice, "you have had but a taste of it. . . ." ("A taste of it; a taste of it." The phrase repeated itself like the catch of a song. . . . When he regained his attention, the sentence had moved on.)

". . . these questions. I will put them to you again from the beginning. You will give your answer to each. And if my lord is not satisfied, we must try again."

"My lord!" thought the priest. He rolled his eyes

round a little farther. (He dared not move his head; the sinews of his throat burned like red-hot steel cords at the thought of it.) And he saw a little table floating somewhere in the dark; a candle burned on it; and a melancholy face with dreamy eyes was brightly illuminated. . . . That was my lord Shrewsbury, he considered. . . .

" . . . in what month that you first became privy to the plot against her Grace?"

(Sense was coming back to him again now. He remembered what he had said just now).

"It was in August," he whispered, "in August, I think; two years ago. Mr. Babington wrote to me of it."

"And you went to the Queen of the Scots, you say?"

"Yes."

"And what did you there?"

"I gave the message."

"What was that?"

" . . . That Mr. Babington was her servant always; that he regretted nothing, save that he had failed. He begged her to pray for his soul, and for all that had been with him in the enterprise."

(It appeared to him that he was astonishingly voluble, all at once. He reflected that he must be careful.)

"And what did she say to that?"

"She declared herself guiltless of the plot . . . that she knew nothing of it; and that——"

"Now then; now then. You expect my lord to believe that?"

"I do not know. . . . But it was what was said."

"And you profess that you knew nothing of the plot till then?"

"I knew nothing of it till then," whispered the priest steadily. "But——"

(A face suddenly blotted out more of the light.)

"Yes?"

"Anthony—I mean Mr. Babington—had spoken to me a great while before—in . . . in some village inn. . . . I forget where. It was when I was a lad. He asked whether I would join in some enterprise. He did not say what it was. . . . But I thought it to be against the Queen of England. . . . And I would not." . . .

He closed his eyes again. There had begun a slow heat of pain in ankles and wrists, not wholly unbearable, and a warmth began to spread in his body. A great shudder or two shook him. The voice said something he could not hear. Then a metal rim was pressed to his mouth; and a stream of something at once icy and fiery ran into his mouth and out at the corners. He swallowed once or twice; and his senses came back.

"You do not expect us to believe all that!" came the voice.

"It is the truth, for all that," murmured the priest. The next question came sudden as a shot fired:

"You were at Fotheringay?"

"Yes."

"In what house?"

"I was in the inn—the 'New Inn,' I think it is."

"And you spoke with her Grace again?"

"No; I could not get at her. But——"

"Well?"

"I was in the court of the castle when her Grace was executed."

There was a murmur of voices. He thought that

someone had moved over to the table where my lord sat; but he could not move his eyes again, the labour was too great.

"Who was with you in the inn—as your friend, I mean?"

"A . . . a young man was with me. His name was Merton. He is in France, I think."

"And he knew you to be a priest?" came the voice without an instant's hesitation.

"Why——" Then he stopped short, just in time.

"Well?"

"How should he think that?" asked Robin.

There was a laugh somewhere. Then the voice went on, almost good-humouredly.

"Mr. Alban; what is the use of this fencing? You were taken in a hiding-hole with the very vestments at your feet. We *know* you to be a priest. We are not seeking to entrap you in that, for there is no need. But there are other matters altogether which we must have from you. You have been made priest beyond the seas, in Rheims——"

"I swear to you that I was not," whispered Robin instantly and eagerly, thinking he saw a loophole.

"Well, then, at Chalons, or Douai: it matters not where. That is not our affair to-day. All that will be dealt with before my lords at the Assizes. But what we must have from you now is your answer to some other questions."

"Assuming me to be a priest?"

"Mr. Alban, I will talk no more on that point. I tell you we know it. But we must have answers on other points. I will come back to Merton presently.

These are the questions. I will read them through to you. Then we will deal with them one by one."

There was the rustle of a paper. An extraordinary desire for sleep came down on the priest; it was only by twitching his head a little, and causing himself acute shoots of pain in his neck that he could keep himself awake. He knew that he must not let his attention wander again. He remembered clearly now that Father Campion was dead, and that Marjorie could not have been here just now. . . . He must take great care not to become so much confused again.

"The first question," read the voice slowly, "is, Whether you have said mass in other places beside Padley and the manor at Booth's Edge. We know that you must have done so; but we must have the names of the places, and of the parties present, so far as you can remember them.

"The second question is, the names of all those other priests with whom you have spoken in England, since you came from Rheims; and the names of all other students, not yet priests, or scarcely, whom you knew at Rheims, and who are for England.

"The third question is, the names of all those whom you know to be friends of Mr. John FitzHerbert, Mr. Bassett and Mr. Fenton—not being priests; but Papists.

"These three questions will do as a beginning. When you have answered these, there is a number more. Now, sir."

The last two words were rapped out sharply. Robin opened his eyes.

"As to the first two questions," he whispered. "These assume that I am a priest myself. Yet that is what you have to prove against me. The third question concerns . . . concerns my loyalty to my friends. But I will tell you——"

"Yes?" (The voice was sharp and eager.)

"I will tell you the names of two friends of each of those gentlemen you have named."

A pen suddenly scratched on paper. He could not see who held it.

"Yes?" said the voice again. •

"Well, sir. The names of two of the friends of Mr. FitzHerbert are, Mr. Bassett and Mr. Fenton. The names——"

"Bah!" (The word sounded like the explosion of a gun.) "You are playing with us——"

"The names," murmured the priest slowly, "of two of Mr. Fenton's friends are Mr. FitzHerbert and——"

A face, upside-down, thrust itself suddenly almost into his. He could feel the hot breath on his forehead.

"See here, Mr. Alban. You are fooling us. Do you think this is a Christmas game? I tell you it is not yet three o'clock. There are three hours more yet——"

A smooth, sad voice interrupted. (The reversed face vanished.)

"You have threatened the prisoner," it said, "but you have not yet told him the alternative."

"No, my lord. . . . Yes, my lord. Listen, Mr. Alban. My lord here says that if you will answer these questions he will use his influence on your behalf. Your life is forfeited, as you know very well. There is not a dog's chance for you. Yet, if you will but answer these

three questions—and no more—— (No more, my lord?)—Yes; these three questions and no more, my lord will use his influence for you. He can promise nothing, he says, but that; but my lord's influence—well, we need say no more on that point. If you refuse to answer, on the other hand, there are yet three hours more to-day; there is all to-morrow, and the next day. And, after that, your case will be before my lords at the Assizes. You have had but a taste of what we can do. . . . And then, sir, my lord does not wish to be harsh. . . .”

There was a pause.

Robin was counting up the hours. It was three o'clock now. Then he had been on the rack, with intervals, since nine o'clock. That was six hours. There was but half that again for to-day. Then would come the night. He need not consider further than that. . . . But he must guard his tongue. It might speak, in spite——

“Well, Mr. Alban?”

He opened his eyes.

“Well, sir?”

“Which is it to be?”

The priest smiled and closed his eyes again. If he could but fix his attention on the mere pain, he thought, and refuse utterly to consider the way of escape, he might be able to keep his unruly tongue in check.

“You will not, then?”

“No.”

The appalling pain ran through him again like fiery snakes of iron—from wrist to shoulders, from ankles to thighs, as the hands seized him and lifted him. . . .

There was a moment or two of relief as he sank down once more into the trough of torture. He could feel that his feet were being handled, but it appeared as if nothing touched his flesh. He gave a great sighing moan as his arms were drawn back over his head; and the sweat poured again from all over his body.

Then, as the cords tightened:

"As Thy arms, O Christ, were extended . . ." he whispered.

CHAPTER IX.

I.

A GREAT murmuring crowd filled every flat spot of ground and pavement and parapet. They stood even on the balustrade of St. Mary's Bridge; there were fringes of them against the sky on the edges of roofs a quarter of a mile away. No flat surface was to be seen anywhere except on the broad reach of the river, and near the head of the bridge, in the circular space, ringed by steel caps and pike-points, where the gallows and ladder rose. Close beside them a column of black smoke rose heavily into the morning air, bellying away into the clear air. A continual steady low murmur of talking went up continually.

There had been no hanging within the memory of any that had roused such interest. Derbyshire men had been hung often enough; a criminal usually had a dozen friends at least in the crowd to whom he shouted from the ladder. Seminary priests had been executed often enough now to have destroyed the novelty of it for the mob; why, three had been done to death here little more than two months ago in this very place. They gave no

sport, certainly; they died too quietly; and what peculiar interest there was in it lay in the contemplation of the fact that it was for religion that they died. Gentlemen, too, had been hanged here now and then—polished persons, dressed in their best, who took off their outer clothes carefully, and in one or two cases had handed them to a servant; gentlemen with whom the sheriff shook hands before the end, who eyed the mob imperturbably or affected even not to be aware of the presence of the vulgar. But this hanging was sublime.

First, he was a Derbyshire man, a seminary priest and a gentleman—three points. Yet this was no more than the groundwork of his surpassing interest. For, next, he had been racked beyond belief. It was for three days before his sentence that Mr. Topcliffe himself had dealt with him. (Yes, Mr. Topcliffe was the tall man that had his rooms in the market-place, and always went abroad with two servants. . . . He was to have Padley, too, it was said, as a reward for all his zeal.) Of course, young Mr. Audrey (for that was his real name—not Alban; that was a Popish *alias* such as they all used)—Mr. Audrey had not been on the rack for the whole of every day. But he had been in the rack-house eight or nine hours on the first day, four the second, and six or seven the third. And he had not answered one single question differently from the manner in which he had answered it before ever he had been on the rack at all. (There was a dim sense of pride with regard to this, in many Derbyshire minds. A Derbyshire man, it appeared, was more than a match for even a Londoner and a sworn servant of her Grace.) It was said that Mr. Audrey would have to be helped up the ladder, even though he

had not been racked for a whole week since his sentence.

Next, the trial itself had been full of interest. A Papist priest was, of course, fair game. (Why, the Spanish Armada itself had been full of them, it was said, all come to subdue England. . . . Well, they had had their bellyful of salt water and English iron by now.) But this Papisher had hit back and given sport. He had flatly refused to be caught, though the questions were swift and subtle enough to catch any clerk. Certainly he had not denied that he was a priest; but he had said that that was what the Crown must prove: he was not there as a witness, he had said, but as a prisoner; he had even entreated them to respect their own legal dignities! But there had been a number of things against him, and even if none of these had been proved, still, the mere sum of them was enough; there could be no smoke without fire, said the proverb-quoters. It was alleged that he had been privy to the plot against the Queen (the plot of young Mr. Babington, who had sold his house down there a week or two only before his arrest); he had denied this, but he had allowed that he had spoken with her Grace immediately after the plot; and this was a highly suspicious circumstance: if he allowed so much as this, the rest might be safely presumed. Again, it was said that he had had part in attempts to free the Queen of the Scots, even from Fotheringay itself; and had been in the castle court, with a number of armed servants, at the very time of her execution. Again, if he allowed that he had been present, even though he denied the armed servants, the rest might be presumed. Finally, since he were a priest,

and had seen her Grace at a time when there was no chaplain allowed to her, it was certain that he must have ministered their Popish superstitions to her, and this was neither denied nor affirmed: he had said to this that they had yet to prove him a priest at all. The very spectacle of the trial, too, had been remarkable; for, first, there was the extraordinary appearance of the prisoner, bent double like an old man, with the face of a dead one, though he could not be above thirty years old at the very most; and then there was the unusual number of magistrates present in court besides the judges, and my lord Shrewsbury himself, who had presided at the racking. It was one of my lord's men, too, that had helped to identify the prisoner.

But the supreme interest lay in even more startling circumstances—in the history of Mistress Manners, who was present through the trial with Mr. Biddell the lawyer, and who had obtained at least two interviews with the prisoner, one before the torture and the other after sentence. It was in Mistress Manners' house at Booth's Edge that the priest had been taken; and it was freely rumoured that although Mr. Audrey had once been betrothed to her, yet that she had released and sent him herself to Rheims, and all to end like this. And yet she could bear to come and see him again; and, it was said, would be present somewhere in the crowd even at his death.

Finally, the tale of how the priest had been taken by his own father—old Mr. Audrey of Matstead—him that was now lying sick in Mr. Columbello's house—this put the crown on all the rest. A hundred rumours flew this way and that; one said that the old man had

known nothing of his son's presence in the country, but had thought him to be still in foreign parts. Another, that he knew him to be in England, but not that he was in the county; a third, that he knew very well who it was in the house he went to search, and had searched it and taken him on purpose to set his own loyalty beyond question. Opinions differed as to the propriety of such an action. . . .

So then the great crowd of heads—men from all the countryside, from farms and far-off cottages and the wild hills, mingling with the townsfolk—this crowd, broken up into levels and patches by river and houses and lanes, moved to and fro in the October sunshine, and sent up, with the column of smoke that eddied out from beneath the bubbling tar-cauldron by the gallows, a continual murmur of talking, like the sound of slow-moving wheels of great carts.

II.

He felt dazed and blind, yet with a kind of lightness too as he came out of the gaol-gate into that packed mass of faces, held back by guards from the open space where the horse and the hurdle waited. A dozen persons or so were within the guards; he knew several of them by sight; two or three were magistrates; another was an officer; two were ministers with their Bibles.

It is hard to say whether he were afraid. Fear was there, indeed—he knew well enough that in his case, at

any rate, the execution would be done as the law ordered; that he would be cut down before he had time to die, and that the butchery would be done on him while he would still be conscious of it. Death, too, was fearful, in any case. . . . Yet there were so many other things to occupy him—there was the exhilarating knowledge that he was to die for his faith and nothing else; for they had offered him his life if he would go to church; and they had proved nothing as to any complicity of his in any plot, and how could they, since there was none? There was the pain of his tormented body to occupy him; a pain that had passed from the acute localised agonies of snapped sinews and wrenched joints into one vast physical misery that soaked his whole body as in a flood; a pain that never ceased; of which he dreamed darkly, as a hungry man dreams of food which he cannot eat, to which he awoke again twenty times a night as to a companion nearer to him than the thoughts with which he attempted to distract himself. This pain, at least, would have an end presently. Again, there was an intermittent curiosity as to how and what would befall his flying soul when the butchery was done. "To sup in Heaven" was a phrase used by one of his predecessors on the threshold of death. . . . For what did that stand? . . . And at other times there had been no curiosity, but an acquiescence in old childish images. Heaven at such times appeared to him as a summer garden, with pavilions, and running water and the song of birds . . . a garden where he would lie at ease at last from his torn body and that feverish mind, which was all that his pain had left to him; where Mary went, gracious and motherly, with her

virgins about her; where the Crucified Lamb of God would talk with him as a man talks with his friend, and allow him to lie at the Pierced Feet. . . . where the glory of God rested like eternal sunlight on all that was there; on the River of Life, and the wood of the trees that are for the healing of all hurts.

And, last of all, there was a confused medley of more human thoughts that concerned persons other than himself. He could not remember all the persons clearly; their names and their faces came and went. Marjorie, his father, Mr. John FitzHerbert and Mr. Anthony, who had been allowed to come and see him; Dick Sampson, who had come in with Marjorie the second time and had kissed his hands. One thing at least he remembered clearly as he stood here, and that was how he had bidden Mistress Manners, even now, not to go overseas and become a nun, as she had wished; but rather to continue her work in Derbyshire, if she could.

So then he stood, bent double on two sticks, blinking and peering out at the faces, wondering whether it was a roar of anger or welcome or compassion that had broken out at his apparition, and smiling—smiling piteously, not of deliberation, but because the muscles of his mouth so moved, and he could not contract them again.

He understood presently that he was to lie down on the hurdle, with his head to the horses' heels.

This was a great business, to be undertaken with care. He gave his two sticks to a man, and took his arm. Then he kneeled, clinging to the arm as a child to a swimmer's in a rough sea, and sank gently down.

But he could not straighten his legs, so they allowed him to lie half sideways, and tied him so. It was amazingly uncomfortable, and, before he was settled, twice the sweat suddenly poured from his face as he found some new channel of pain in his body. . . .

An order or two was issued in a loud, shouting voice; there was a great confusion and scuffling, and the crack of a whip. Then, with a jerk that tore his whole being, he was flicked from his place; the pain swelled and swelled till there seemed no more room for it in all God's world; and he closed his eyes so as not to see the house-roofs and the faces and the sky whirl about in that mad jiggling dance. . . .

After that he knew very little of the journey. For the most part his eyes were tight closed; he sobbed aloud half a dozen times as the hurdle lifted and dropped over rough places in the road. Two or three times he opened his eyes to see what the sounds signified, especially a loud, bellowing voice almost in his ear that cried texts of Scripture at him.

"We have but one Mediator between God and man, the Man Christ Jesus. . . ."

"We then, being justified by faith . . . For if by the works of the Law we are justified. . . ."

He opened his eyes wide at that, and there was the face of one of the ministers bobbing against the sky, flushed and breathless, yet indomitable, bawling aloud as he trotted along to keep pace with the horse.

Then he closed his eyes again. He knew that he, too, could bandy texts if that were what was required. Perhaps, if he were a better man and more mortified, he might be able to do so, as the martyrs sometimes

had done. But he could not . . . he would have a word to say presently perhaps, if it were permitted; but not now. His pain occupied him; he had to deal with that and keep back, if he could, those sobs that were wrenched from him now and again. He had made but a poor beginning in his journey, he thought; he must die more decently than that.

The end came unexpectedly. Just when he thought he had gained his self-control again, so as to make no sound at any rate, the hurdle stopped. He clenched his teeth to meet the dreadful wrench with which it would move again; but it did not. Instead there was a man down by him, untying his bonds. He lay quite still when they were undone; he did not know which limb to move first, and he dreaded to move any.

"Now then," said the voice, with a touch of compassion, he thought.

He set his teeth, gripped the arm and raised himself—first to his knees, then to his feet, where he stood swaying. An indescribable roar ascended steadily on all sides; but he could see little of the crowd as yet. He was standing in a cleared space, held by guards. A couple of dozen persons stood here; three or four on horseback; and one of these he thought to be my lord Shrewsbury, but he was not sure, since his head was against the glare of the sun. He turned a little, still holding to the man's arm, and not knowing what to do, and saw a ladder behind him; he raised his eyes and saw that its head rested against the cross-beam of a single gallows, that a rope hung from this beam, and that a figure sitting astride of this cross-beam was busy

with this rope. The shock of the sight cooled and nerved him; rather, it drew his attention all from himself. . . . He looked lower again, and behind the gallows was a column of heavy smoke going up, and in the midst of the smoke a cauldron hung on a tripod. Beside the cauldron was a great stump of wood, with a chopper and a knife lying upon it. . . . He drew one long steady breath, expelled it again, and turned back to my lord Shrewsbury. As he turned, he saw him make a sign, and felt himself grasped from behind.

III.

He reached at last with his hands the rung of the ladder on which the executioner's foot rested, hearing, as he went painfully up, the roar of voices wax to an incredible volume. It was impossible for any to speak so that he could hear, but he saw the hands above him in eloquent gesture, and understood that he was to turn round. He did so cautiously, grasping the man's foot, and so rested, half sitting on a rung, and holding it as well as he could with his two hands. Then he felt a rope pass round his wrists, drawing them closer together. . . . As he turned, the roar of voices died to a murmur; the murmur died to silence, and he understood and remembered. It was now the time to speak. . . . He gathered for the last time all his forces together. With the sudden silence, clearness came back to his mind, and he remembered word for word the little speech he had rehearsed so often during the last week. He had learned it by heart, fearful lest God should give him no

words if he trusted to the moment, lest God should not see fit to give him even that interior consolation which was denied to so many of the saints—yet without which he could not speak from the heart. He had been right, he knew now: there was no religious consolation; he felt none of that strange heart-shaking ecstasy that had transfigured other deaths like his; he had none of the ready wit that Campion had showed. He saw nothing but the clear October sky above him, cut by the roofs fringed with heads (a skein of birds passed slowly over it as he raised his eyes); and, beneath, that irreckonable pavement of heads, motionless now as a corn-field in a still evening, one glimpse of the river—the river, he remembered even at this instant, that came down from Hathersage and Padley and his old home. But there was no open vision, such as he had half hoped to see, no unimaginable glories looming slowly through the veils in which God hides Himself on earth, no radiant face smiling into his own—only this arena of watching human faces turned up to his, waiting for his last sermon. . . . He thought he saw faces that he knew, though he lost them again as his eyes swept on—Mr. Barton, the old minister of Matstead; Dick; Mr. Bassett. . . . Their faces looked terrified. . . . However, this was not his affair now.

As he was about to speak he felt hands about his neck, and then the touch of a rope passed across his face. For an indescribable instant a terror seized on him; he closed his eyes and set his teeth. The spasm passed, and so soon as the hands were withdrawn again, he began:

"Good people"—(at the sound of his voice, high and broken, the silence became absolute. A thin crowing of a cock from far off in the country came like a thread and ceased)—"Good people: I die here as a Catholic man, for my priesthood, which I now confess before all the world." (A stir of heads and movements below distracted him. But he went on at once.) "There have been alleged against me crimes in which I had neither act nor part, against the life of her Grace and the peace of her dominions."

"Pray for her Grace," rang out a sharp voice below him.

"I will do so presently. . . . It is for that that I am said to die, in that I took part in plots of which I knew nothing till all was done. Yet I was offered my life, if I would but conform and go to church; so you see very well——"

A storm of confused voices interrupted him. He could distinguish no sentence, so he waited till they ceased again.

"So you see very well," he cried, "for what it is that I die. It is for the Catholic faith——"

"Beat the drums! beat the drums!" cried a voice. There began a drumming; but a howl like a beast's surged up from the whole crowd. When it died again the drum was silent. He glanced down at my lord Shrewsbury and saw him whispering with an officer. Then he continued:

"It is for the Catholic faith, then, that I die—that which was once the faith of all England—and which, I pray, may be one day its faith again. In that have I lived, and in that will I die. And I pray God, further,

that all who hear me to-day may have grace to take it as I do—as the true Christian Religion (and none other)—revealed by our Saviour Christ.”

The crowd was wholly quiet again now. My lord had finished his whispering, and was looking up. But the priest had made his little sermon, and thought that he had best pray aloud before his strength failed him. His knees were already shaking violently under him, and the sweat was pouring again from his face, not so much from the effort of his speech as from the pain which that effort caused him. It seemed that there was not one nerve in his body that was not in pain.

“I ask all Catholics, then, that hear me to join with me in prayer. . . . First, for Christ’s Catholic Church throughout the world, for her peace and furtherance. . . . Next, for our England, for the conversion of all her children; and, above all, for her Grace, my Queen and yours, that God will bless and save her in this world, and her soul eternally in the next. For these and all other such matters I will beg all Catholics to join with me and to say the *Our Father*; and when I am in my agony to say yet another for my soul.”

“*Our Father . . .*”

From the whole packed space the prayer rose up, in great and heavy waves of sound. There were cries of mockery three or four times, but each was suddenly cut off. . . . The waves of sound rolled round and ceased, and the silence was profound. The priest opened his eyes; closed them again. Then with a loud voice he began to cry:

“O Christ, as Thine arms were extended——”

He stopped again, shaken even from that intense point of concentration to which he was forcing himself, by the amazing sound that met his ears. He had heard, at the close of the *Our Father*, a noise which he could not interpret; but no more had happened. But now the whole world seemed screaming and swaying: he heard the trample of horses beneath him—voices in loud expostulation.

He opened his eyes; the clamour died again at the same instant. . . . For a moment his eyes wandered over the heads and up to the sky, to see if some vision. . . . Then he looked down. . . .

Against the ladder on which he stood, a man's figure was writhing and embracing the rungs kneeling on the ground. He was strangely dressed, in some sort of a loose gown, in a tight silk night-cap, and his feet were bare. The man's head was dropped, and the priest could not see his face. He looked beyond for some explanation, and there stood, all alone, a girl in a hooded cloak, who raised her great eyes to his. As he looked down again the man's head had fallen back, and the face was staring up at him, so distorted with speechless entreaty, that even he, at first, did not recognise it. . . .

Then he saw it to be his father, and understood enough, at least, to act as a priest for the last time.

He smiled a little, leaned his own head forward as from a cross, and spoke. . . .

"Absolvo te a peccatis tuis in nomine Patris et Filii et Spiritus Sancti. . . ."

IV.

He only awoke once again, after the strangling and the darkness had passed. He could see nothing, nor hear, except a heavy murmuring noise, not unpleasant. But there was one last Pain now into which all others had passed, keen and cold like water, and it was about his heart.

"O Christ——" he whispered, and so died.

THE END.

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